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Fantasy & Science Fiction

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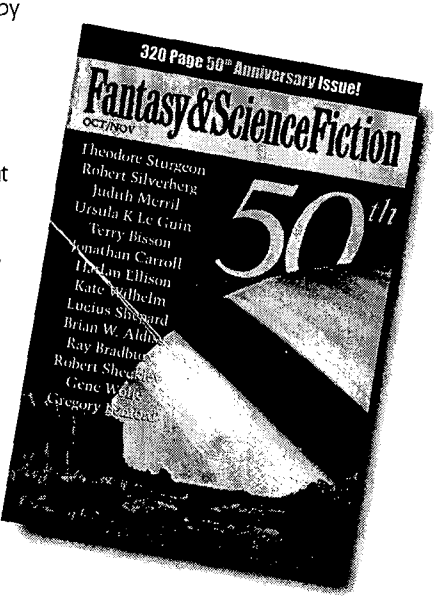

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Among our most popular stories from 1998 were Sheila Finch's two Lingster stories, "Reading the Bones" and "The Naked Face of God." Ms. Finch recently finished a Young Adult novel entitled Tiger in the Sky, *and now she's working on more episodes from the annals of the Guild of Xenolinguists. This new story is one of the best: a stirring tale of research and intrigue on a watery planet—*

No Brighter Glory

By Sheila Finch

ALYN CARADOC BROUGHT the small dive boat to the tree-surrounded dock on Walden's main island. The dwarf *Tursiops truncatus* surfaced beside her, squawked once in apology, then submerged.

Dr. Rob Wong held out a towel. "You're on a fool's errand, you see."

InterWorld-Biotech's senior scientist picked up the conversation he'd started this morning as if there'd been no time in between. Alyn hadn't expected the scientists at this research station to be ecstatic with her presence since her findings might delay their work, but Wong seemed to take it personally. She climbed onto the wooden dock, planks warm underfoot; she was conscious of her tight-fitting alien wetskin that suggested far too much.

Wong averted his gaze. "There's really no work here for a lingster."

The dwarf tursiops surfaced again, turned an eye on the humans, then headed off to the dolphin pens, his wake sparking red in the late afternoon sun. IW-Bio used a number of dwarves on this planet, half the size of their Terran ancestors. This one was called JJ.

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"PETAL sent you a long way for nothing. I hate to see you waste your time," Wong said.

Alyn wrapped herself in the towel. "I'd like to decide that for myself, Dr. Wong."

"Rob," he said.

He was as angularly awkward as a teen with a body grown too fast for poise. Tall, black-haired, carelessly dressed in faded blue dungarees, he seemed maybe a few years older than her own just-turned-thirty, with the intense aura of one who'd been down into the pit; some of its darkness still clung to him. Under other circumstances, she'd have found his air of melancholy rather attractive. That was the Celt in her, as her brother would've said.

She closed her eyes. The memory of her brother still hurt; there'd been no time to mourn when the message caught up with her just as she was leaving for Walden. There still wasn't.

"We've identified only primitive species here, you see. And no signs of intelligence. IW-Bio is trying to save life, not endanger it." Wong spread his hands wide, inviting her to share his bewilderment: The Good Guys, trying to save life, slandered by a disgruntled ex-employee.

The indigenous life forms on this planet would most likely die out in the process, even if they weren't directly used in the field trials. Yet where else could IW-Bio have chosen to test its vaccines against such a deadly enemy? *Mynah A* attacked the unborn of a world's flora and fauna, maiming and deforming the offspring in animal womb or plant seed, sometimes in hideous fashion. Hijacking unsuspecting travelers, it vaulted from planet to planet across the Orion Arm and had been identified as the culprit in die-backs on half a dozen worlds.

There would've been no problem with IW-Bio's research if the ex-employee hadn't told People for the Ethical Treatment of All Life that Walden's oceans contained at least one possibly intelligent species that wasn't reported. PETAL hired a xenolinguist with dive skills to investigate.

"If you're right, I won't find anything," she said. "There's nothing personal in my investigation, Dr. Wong. But if I find even one sentient ILF, I'll have to shut you down."

"Please, call me Rob."

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His accent marked him as not Earth-born, but she couldn't place it. There were so many human colonies and colony worlds scattered around the Orion Arm she'd lost count.

"Some people here have dedicated their lives to defeating this killer," he said. "They don't understand why PETAL is interfering. They'd like to see you fail."

"Is that a threat?"

He gazed steadily at her for a moment. "I heard the Guild takes good care of its own."

The Guild of Xenolinguists was far away and not as omnipotent as he seemed to believe. Risk was built into her job; she sometimes thought of it as being a secret agent behind enemy lines. Lingsters were taught to maintain neutrality, and that shielded them from the worst repercussions.

"You'll have to excuse me now."

"Sure. I didn't mean to hold you up." His smile was lopsided, like a shy schoolboy's. "I'd like to take some time and show you around. Do you like small islands?"

"I was born on one. Maybe later?"

She walked past him beneath lush foliage toward a cluster of functional cubes perched on stilts over mudflats that exhaled the briny tang of seawater.

Enjoying the luxury of a hot shower in the dormitory cube's well-equipped communal bathroom, she decided that whoever named this world possessed a sense of humor. The planet had no continents, only long chains of low-lying tropical islands circling the globe in a narrow band near the equator. IW-Bio had selected Walden for research because it resembled the water world on which humans had first encountered *Mynah A*.

It was a planet carrying only primitive ILFs, she'd been informed, plants and simple forms of animal life sacrificed to the greater good. The argument a man once made to his vengeful god on Earth had been codified into law throughout much of the Orion Arm: finding one sentient species here should spare the planet. Codes spelled out just how high on an intelligence scale an ILF would need to score to earn the judgment of sentience.

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But all intelligence should be treated with respect, not just the rarer glory of sentience. IW-Bio's use of even primitive ILFs for critical research had required dispensation from a tribunal representing many worlds and many sentient races; it would be revoked if Alyn reported violations. PETAL paid well for her services; her account would be satisfyingly thick, even after the Guild took its hefty share.

Back in her room — Wong had assigned her the comfortable guest quarters for visiting IW-Bio execs — she checked the time. Still an hour before the evening meal. She'd seen the brief clip smuggled off-world by the whistle-blower; the complete version should be here in IW-Bio's computer. She'd thought about checking it this morning after the shuttle dropped her off, but opted to take advantage of good weather instead. Unfortunately, the dive had produced no new evidence.

Not really hungry, and anxious to get on with her work, she decided to forego joining the scientists for supper.

"Computer. Access the survey records of the tursiops JJ."

Dwarf tursiops had been bred a hundred years ago for convenience, and their intelligence had suffered. They were the miniature poodles of the cetacean world: charming, helpful, but lacking the sharp minds of their wild ancestors. Like lingsters, the dwarves carried embedded chips for communication. However, they didn't have her ability to shut it down at will, and that meant the computer had witnessed and recorded everything JJ had seen.

She lay down on the bed and closed her eyes. "Begin sequence with target creature."

Immediately, the computer's transmission engaged her sensorium, and she was underwater with the tursiops as her mind flooded with images downloaded at dizzying speed. Outlines of rocks and caves emerged, alien plant forms, all accompanied by a continuous stream of data from the computer: depth, oxygen content, nitrogen, temperature. The viewpoint was a dolphin's eye, disorienting until she got the hang of it, and complicated by the superimposed shimmer of the dolphin's echolocation probe.

On the sandy floor of a cave, she made out a glistening line of asymmetrical shells apparently from some kind of mollusk. The view zoomed in — her stomach reacted to the illusion as though she'd physi-

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cally shot rapidly toward the target shells — and now she saw that the edges of some shells seemed to have been deliberately sharpened.

Then: movement in the gloomy interior. A blurry shape. Milliseconds passed. Whatever it was scuttled quickly away and the download stopped.

She considered what JJ had seen. It had been a brief encounter, far too quick for a human to make a judgment. Nor did the existence of tools in itself prove a creature intelligent. The standard criteria for determining sentience from intelligence added that their absence didn't prove the opposite. Phylogenetic chauvinism had long prevented humans from recognizing forms of intelligence that didn't require the making or use of tools, as the dolphin tutors at the Mother House relished reminding their pupils.

"Run the image of that ILF, without sonar data."

The computer complied. Out of the thick darkness which seemed to engulf her, something moved indistinctly.

"Enhance."

The image in her mind grew larger, sharper. A grayish-blue creature emerged, long tentacles descending directly below a bulbous head ringed with tiny eyes.

"Freeze. And measure."

A grid appeared, superimposed on the image: the creature was a little under forty centimeters head to tip. She stared at it for a few seconds.

"That'll do. Exit tursiops records."

She lay still, thinking about the preliminary pieces of the puzzle. Intelligence without sentience was the norm in the Orion Arm, but occasionally an inexperienced lingster took a display of the first as proof of the second. If she found the right signs, then IW-Bio must suspend operations until arrangements could be made to shield the ILF from potential harm.

Rob Wong wouldn't like it, but that couldn't be helped.

Early next morning, the small boat bobbed in the swells at the dock as Alyn waited for the dwarf dolphin. The day promised to be hot again; the sun shone in a cloudless turquoise sky shading to cobalt on the horizon. The air itself was almost liquid, sparkling with humidity and

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streaming with a smell like fish and kelp that reminded her of home in the Hebrides.

She checked the contents of a small pouch, then secured it on her belt. Small, bright metal blocks in assorted shapes — color's usefulness faded with increasing depth as long-wavelength light was attenuated — and a flat piece of plastic that folded out to reveal holes that matched the blocks. Items she used to conduct tests on marine life.

Sound burst over the link. She recognized the distinctive syntax and joyfully breathless tumble of JJ's voice which the computer reproduced faithfully.

"Coming, we, now! Here! Here!"

Like all Delphinidae, JJ used the plural pronoun. The dwarf tursiop's smiling face rose out of water so clear it looked like the cut face of an emerald.

"I'm ready, JJ."

JJ flashed away toward open sea. The small boat purred to life, and she followed the dolphin out of the shelter of the bay. Yesterday JJ had taken her to an island where the dolphins had sighted the creature, but several hours of searching yielded nothing. Today he guided her past the island to a reef on the northern edge of the archipelago girdling the planet's equator.

"Arriving, we, soon," JJ's voice said over the link.

Making out a low line of rock, she cut the engine and drifted till she was close enough to drop anchor. The cable slid smoothly over the bow. She pulled the wetskin's face flap up over her head, leaving her nose and mouth free. As soon as she sealed them, the wetskin — a Venatixi design — would begin filtering oxygen out of the water and feeding it straight into her bloodstream through the surface of her skin. Light as spidersilk, the wetskin covered every part of her except her eyes and hands, keeping her warm down to freezing temperatures. She'd tucked the thicker gloves into her belt but didn't expect to need them today.

JJ watched as she fastened fins onto her feet, familiar tursiops smile on his face. An orca had once confided to her that it really did amuse cetaceans to watch a human put on fins.

She slipped over the edge into the water. When they'd swum a few meters along the reef, she pulled the slick wetskin up, sealing her nose and mouth. The sensation of being smothered seized her as it did each time at

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this point, triggering an atavistic fear. Her heart rate shot up, and she fought the urge to panic. Then calm returned as oxygen entered her bloodstream directly through the alien skin interface. She adjusted the fit of goggles over her eyes.

The temperature dropped steadily as she descended, following the anchor cable; she stayed warm inside the wetskin. Glancing up, she saw the shadowy hull of her small boat silvered with bubbles. High power lenses enhanced her vision in the gloom; now she could see a marine forest, dominated by a tall plant whose black and yellow fronds were strung with small bumps like an upside down bead curtain. From time to time, something small and monochrome flashed past.

It would be a tragedy if *Mynah A* escaped from the lab and doomed the unborn life forms of this world. The vectors by which the virus spread from female to female were still not well understood. Her own potential risk was minimal; as a lingster, she'd long ago taken precautions not to have children.

She considered opening the link to the computer to record her impressions, then thought better of it. Although Wong seemed pleasant enough, she felt the need for caution. Anyone with access to the computer could see and hear everything JJ did; they didn't need to monitor her special viewpoint as well.

Something brushed against her leg. She looked down to see a tiny creature no bigger than her fist, resembling a cross between mouse and small crustacean, with a streamlined carapace, large eyes in a small head, whiskers and tiny feet. The creature bumped against her outstretched hand. Cute little thing, she thought, but not enough intelligence to fear the unknown. Fish on Earth showed the same blank acceptance of divers.

"*Finding cave, we, now,*" JJ sent. "*Approve?*"

"Approve."

The tiny newcomer whisked away.

JJ nosed along the slope of the reef. She followed, parting the tangle of strands carefully, peering through dimness into crevices and caves till her attention snagged on a soft glitter of iridescent shells like a magpie's horde.

It reminded her of an exhibit she'd seen in an anthropology museum: chipped flint ax heads, humankind's first primitive tools. She'd been no

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more than eight or nine, but she remembered sensing the sweep of human history that stretched from ax heads to starships. "*The roots of language,*" her Guild teacher told them, "*leave no artifacts, but have the same humble origins.*"

Did the ILF she sought eat the shells' occupants first, or did it merely scavenge the discards? Carnivore or omnivore, the likelihood of intelligence would be higher than if it were an herbivore.

Movement at the corner of her eye caught her attention. Lifting her gaze, she found herself face to face with the creature itself, its ring of eyes glowing milkily like a pearl headband in a weak shaft of light. A cephalopod of some kind. Or a decapod without the chitinous carapace; she counted ten long tentacles waving frantically. It seemed as astonished to see her as she was to see it. For a second it floated in the cave's entrance, rotating slowly as if allowing each eye in the circle to observe her in turn. Then it changed shape, the bulbous, almost transparent head elongating, the tentacles clustering straight together, and it shot back headfirst into the darkness.

But it didn't go very far. She caught the gleam of luminous eyes watching her from inside the cave.

JJ nudged her arm with his hard beak. "*Approve?*"

"Approve."

She studied the shells, wondering what the creature used them for. Formation of goals, problem solving, ability to learn from experience — the shells probably represented several of the basic criteria on the scale. Intelligence led to tool-making, and tool-using increased intelligence.

One of the quickest tests was curiosity, the great driver of Homo sapiens' ascent from beasthood. Opening the pouch on her belt, she took out a shiny metal pyramid the size of a pigeon's egg and laid it down beside the shells, then backed off a little way and waited.

At first the decapod did nothing. Then, so fast she almost didn't see it happen, the creature emerged, a tentacle whipped out, seized the pyramid, and withdrew.

Problem solving came next. Cautiously, she slid a couple of centimeters into the cave. The creature didn't move. She came in a little further. This time, it stood straight up, all ten tentacles stiff — more comical than scary — and she halted, not wanting to frighten it.

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Below the circle of eyes at one point, there was a mouth, hardly more than a horizontal slit. The mouth gaped open in what might be a threat gesture, and the creature's head lit up with green bioluminescence. It reminded her of her small niece's attempt at a Halloween ghost puppet, a white scarf over a crumpled ball of paper for a head, and a clumsily inked mouth.

Settling cross-legged on the sandy floor of the cave, she held out both hands, palm up: *No threat.* The decapod settled back down too, its eyes staring at her warily. She wondered whether she was looking at a male or a female, or if indeed the decapods were even a two-sex species and not a one or a three. So much was unknown here; for once, she was the first human to interact with a new species. The thought excited her.

She reached for the pouch to retrieve another item. The decapod startled and backed away. She waited, motionless, and the creature flowed forward a few centimeters. She touched the pouch, and again it backed off. Obviously, something about the pouch alarmed the decapod, and she wasn't going to get very far using it.

On the little finger of her left hand she wore a tiny silver ring made of crumpled metal foil, a good luck charm from her brother's small daughter the last time she saw her family on Skye. They'd broiled fresh-caught fish on the beach; then the child had taken the silver wrapping the condiments had come in and fashioned a gift. The little ring had been on Alyn's finger ever since. The hardest part of being a lingster was having to accept that she'd never see her family again. She'd thought she'd made her peace with that loss, until news of her brother's death reopened the wound. But she had a job to do here and wouldn't indulge in sentimentality.

As the creature watched, she slipped the ring off and placed it on her palm, a shiny temptation. Slowly the decapod extended a tentacle toward her until it made contact; before it could grasp the ring, she closed her fingers and the creature backed off. Now she put her other hand out beside the first, palms down, offering the decapod both fists. For a few seconds, nothing happened; then the tentacle inched forward, hesitating over each fist in turn. The creature hovered close enough now for Alyn to see the gill flaps working on either side of the slit mouth.

The decapod lightly brushed the hand concealing the ring and waited.

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She turned her palm up and uncurled her fingers. This time it didn't snatch at the trinket, but slid the tip of one tentacle through the ring and held it up. Alyn saw a line of sucker pads along the arm's length like a row of tiny ornamental buttons on a woman's sleeve. Then the decapod took fright again and fled deep into the cave.

"*Happy, you?*" JJ asked.

"Yes, happy."

"*Returning, we, tomorrow. Approve?*"

"Approve."

From the pouch on her belt, she took a marine camera, two centimeters long, and attached the suction pad on its back to the cave wall. On land, the computer would record what the camera observed in her absence. The creature's eating habits would yield useful clues; omnivores had more movement programs in their brains, and that led to mental versatility. Its social interaction, if any, would tell her a lot too.

Oceans had been the womb of life on many planets in the Orion Arm and had nurtured intelligence in their depths. The preliminary evidence for the same process happening on Walden seemed convincing. Alyn was satisfied with the day's work.

THAT EVENING, she stood on the raised deck in front of the dormitory building and began the basic forms of moving meditation, harmonizing movement and breath. A cluster of tiny golden moons hardly bigger than river pebbles arced over an indigo ocean, but together with the vast sweep of the galaxy overhead their light was brilliant. A warm breeze carried the rich scent of salt marsh and the exotic perfume of night-blooming trees; they were short, more like tall bushes, with clusters of grapefruit-sized blossoms that suddenly erupted after sunset directly from the furred trunks.

"Old Chinese discipline," Wong's voice said behind her. Tonight he wore a midnight blue jumpsuit that sparked silver as he moved, and his black hair gleamed. While his clothing was more elegant than yesterday's, his posture seemed if anything more awkward.

"Tai Chi," he explained.

"With a name like Wong, I guess you'd know."

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He leaned with his back against the wooden rail and watched her. Something in the casual pose reminded her of her brother, black-haired too.

"My grandparents practiced every day," Wong said. "But I don't really see the point of clinging to rituals just because one's ancestors believed in them, you see."

She said neutrally, "The Guild teaches many disciplines to manage stress. This one works well for me."

"I suppose stress is part of a lingster's life."

Glancing at him, she read the tense clutch of his face muscles, the twitch that had developed in the fingers gripping the rail. He was uneasy in her presence, as if she might notice he'd forgotten to shave or had put on mismatched socks. There probably weren't many female visitors to Walden on whom he could practice conversation, but she wouldn't rule out a more ominous cause for the tension he displayed just yet.

"The color of your tunic matches your eyes," he said suddenly.

She looked down at her thigh-length, moss green tunic and matching tights. They were old and comfortable rather than stylish, crumpled from being stuffed into her duffel bag, and she doubted he could tell the color of her eyes by starlight. She didn't know whether to feel flattered or amused; she settled on suspicious and stopped her practice.

"Did you come out here to discuss the color of my eyes?"

He ducked his head, looking embarrassed.

"Where are you from originally?" she asked. "Not Earth, obviously."

"I was born on Suchow, in the Leopard system."

Suchow had been one of the first worlds to be devastated by *Mynah A* as it spread. She said, "That explains your passion to defeat this virus. It must've been very bad."

"So you must realize that no one would hold it against you if you found you couldn't satisfy PETAL."

"What're you saying?"

"Better divers than you experience hallucinations."

"You think I hallucinated the decapod?"

"No. But you might be exaggerating its abilities, you see."

"It appears to be intelligent. The question is, how far up the scale?"

He said warily, "Not as far up as humans."

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"Obviously! But I need time to study it."

"Time's what we don't have, you see. You must trust IW-Bio."

She noted the recurrent speech tic. She'd had a teacher who believed a guilty conscience tried to draw attention to its sins through such tics. What was she supposed to "see" in Rob Wong?

"The tech who informed PETAL bore a grudge," he said. "We'd fired him. You don't trust an unreliable witness like that, do you?"

"I'll trust my own observations."

He was silent for a moment, then he said, "I want to show you something."

He took her arm as if they were old friends, and they set off toward the lab buildings squatting dark against the star-thronged sky. Tonight they reminded her of boxes of explosives she'd once seen stacked up along a disused runway on a planet devastated by civil war. She half expected to see the fading red danger sign painted on their sides. Instead, they paused at a door displaying a hazard symbol. He palmed the lock.

"Why the need for security? I didn't think you allowed many visitors."

"When you're battling a killer," he explained, "you take every precaution to keep your personnel from accidental contamination. This serves to reinforce caution."

"I thought males were immune?"

"They could be carriers. We don't know enough about how the virus spreads to take chances."

She entered the chilly room after him. On the far wall, a row of orange, full-body biohazard suits waited for users. He picked up a palm-sized key pad. Over the lab bench, a screen lit, and she saw what appeared to be a plate of warped, olive-colored spaghetti with irregular black swellings, squirming like a nest of snakes. The sight of it made her stomach queasy.

"What is it?"

"*Mynah A*. More virulent in its own way than our one-time nemeses, the Ebola virus and Tam-Kizlyk's myxovirus. Instead of killing its host, *Mynah A* slaughters the next generation."

She shuddered. "It looks like Medusa's hair."

"We have to do everything we can to destroy this one, you see. Before it destroys us."

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"I understand your mission, Rob, but that doesn't mean I can allow you to risk a possibly intelligent species — "

"Nobody can understand who wasn't on Suchow!" he interrupted sharply. "*Mynah A* maimed every child born in the colony, my firstborn included. You can't imagine what he looked like. There were no ears — no eyes in his eye sockets — his tiny hands — " He broke off and passed his own hand over his face. "My wife drowned our baby. Herself with him."

"I'm so sorry...."

He switched the display off. "Human lives are more important than everything else when you fight an enemy like that."

There really wasn't anything else she could say. The strict rules of procedure imposed by the Codes seemed out of touch with tragedy like his.

Wong gazed at her, and she read the pain still etched on his face. "All I'm asking for is a little more time. Couldn't you delay your investigation a few days? I'm so close!"

She shook her head. "I won't debate this with you, Rob."

In silence, they went to supper in the mess hall. She was glad for something that prevented an argument neither could win. Besides Wong, there were three other scientists and seven techs, all male but not all human, and most of them treated her courteously. Two of the human scientists, however, ate in silence, avoiding eye contact with her and leaving the mess early. The others engaged in some goodnatured teasing that PETAL preferred endangered worms and slime mold to people. Wong didn't have much to say.

Back in her room, she prepared for sleep, then remembered the marine camera she'd planted. A prickle of anticipation ran over her. Maybe she'd be lucky here on Walden, and not only do her job for PETAL but also find something to interest the Guild.

On command, the computer downloaded what the lens had seen. Several minutes of empty film ensued. Then, the decapod appeared, its tentacles holding a struggling mouse-fish. A blur of movement. The decapod appeared to be hacking the fish's carapace apart with one of the sharpened shells. Bloody gobbets of flesh drifted past the camera's eye as the decapod worked, the light catching an occasional twinkle from her niece's foil ring.

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She watched a long minute of the butchering activity then stopped the download.

The next two dives yielded no results. The decapod did not return to the cave, and JJ was unable to locate any of the creatures at the reef or any of the nearby islands. Tension strung her nerves tight; she couldn't do her job for PETAL if she couldn't find the ILF. Rob Wong seemed to be getting the delay he'd asked for with no help from her. But she felt another frustration; there was information here the Guild would value, she was certain, but it seemed to be slipping through her fingers.

Something about the assignment itself began to bother her. Several times she went over the computer record of the dolphin's original sighting that had sparked the fired tech's complaint. JJ hadn't really seen much at all, so why had the tech been suspicious enough to report it to PETAL? Something seemed wrong here.

Late in the evening of the second day, as she scanned blank hours recorded by the remote in the decapod's cave, someone knocked at her door.

"Is this late enough?" A dimple came and went in Wong's smile when she opened the door.

"Excuse me?"

"You told me 'later' when I offered to show you around the island. And I noticed you skipped supper tonight. So I've packed some cold food and a bottle of wine. I thought perhaps we could have a midnight picnic."

She'd been working hard for many months; she was overdue for some R&R. And she could take suspicion of everyone here too far. "Well, why not?"

He led her along a narrow, sandy trail, ducking under a thicket of the short, fragrant trees, to the low ridge that formed the island's spine. From up here they had a 360 degree view. The fiery white torrent of the Milky Way flowed over their heads and down to the unseen horizon. Below them the drab buildings of the IW-Bio compound rested on their stilts, softened by the starlight into a flock of sleeping herons.

"Are Walden's other islands this lovely?" she asked.

"For the most part. Some are too small to be anything more than bare rocks." He unpacked a makeshift picnic basket.

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She glanced at the sea, a mirror image of the sky, full of drowned stars; it was almost too lovely to be real, a magnificent stage set for an obvious seduction scene. Yet she couldn't see any harm in enjoying it as long as she didn't forget her duty.

"So much beauty in the universe," he said. "And also so much pain."

"You sound like my Guild teachers."

He grinned, and the shy schoolboy reappeared in his face. "Would you believe I once considered becoming a lingster?"

She bit into crusty bread and asked with her mouth full, "Why didn't you?"

"Too old already. Twelve or so. They would've trained me to be a translator, that's all. That wasn't good enough for me. I wanted to forge interface, break the hidden codes of language, be a pioneer."

She sympathized with his reluctance to settle for second-best. Teasing the secrets of language out of interface was a high joy and an addictive experience.

He filled a wineglass and placed it beside her. "What do you like best about your job?"

"That's easy. There's a special moment right at the heart of interface. Lingsters call it 'communion,' because it really does feel sacred. There's a sense of becoming one with the Other. Transcendence. Lately though, I've been doing this kind of work, running tests, establishing sentience. Interesting, but I miss interface."

"Tell me about the decapod."

"Not much to tell. There're a lot of different kinds of intelligence in the Arm. Some are easier for us to spot and deal with than others. I don't have enough evidence one way or the other just yet."

He was silent for a moment, then he said, "You're doing a very necessary job."

"And so are you," she said. A little embarrassed, she looked away from him. "Please don't think I don't value what you're trying to do here."

"Yet you were hired as my watchdog, perhaps to the point of shutting me down."

His words were sad, not accusatory as hers might've been in similar circumstances. She had an urge to take hold of his hand and comfort him, but she hesitated to act on it. Her career interfered with any chance to

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form long-lasting relationships with anyone, and she'd long ago learned it was less painful not to start friendships she couldn't develop.

Perhaps that's what the Guild meant when it cautioned against allowing emotion to color either the interface or one's life. The Guild was certainly too sophisticated to believe it was necessary — or even possible — for a lingster to shut emotion out altogether. But she wasn't the kind of volatile personality who would fly apart easily; she could handle her feelings. She turned back to gaze at him.

He leaned over and took her by the shoulders, drawing her face to his. His kiss was gentle, tentative. She tasted the warmth of wine and the freshness of salt breeze on his lips. It had been a long time since she'd been attracted to a man; awareness of what she'd given up for her career flared suddenly in her mind. Her heartbeat quickened and she closed her eyes like a diver entering cool water on a hot day.

What am I doing? she thought suddenly. It didn't take a lingster to know what the kiss communicated.

As if he sensed her hesitation, he pulled back and laid his cheek against hers. "We're on different sides, you and I, Alyn."

"This isn't a war," she objected.

"Sometimes it seems like one. I have to defeat *Mynah A*. I have no choice."

The sense of what this battle against the virus meant to him cut her. Certainly there were standards humans must observe, behavior that was important; she didn't question that. But was a slavish following of rulebooks written by dry scholars on benign worlds the best way to face real life? The soldier on the battlefield experienced the danger more immediately than the strategist safe at home.

She said slowly, "I haven't found anything conclusive yet, but if I do, would anything really be lost if I waited a few days to report it to PETAL?"

"You don't have that option," he said.

Stung that he should be the one thinking of duty, she pulled away and emptied her wineglass out onto the grass in silence. But after a moment she decided he was correct, and she was ashamed of her weakness.

He stood up and held out his hand, which she ignored. Neither spoke again as they gathered up the remains of the picnic and re-packed the basket.

* * *

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Early next morning, Wong observed her preparations from the far end of the dock, his parka snapping in a stiff breeze. He didn't offer to help. She considered going over to speak to him, then decided it was better not to encourage the feelings that had stirred yesterday. He hadn't come to breakfast, but she'd found a triangular shell no bigger than her little fingernail on her plate, a hazy mauve peace offering. The shell had a small hole drilled at its apex. Back in her room, she rummaged through her duffel bag to find a length of cord, then slipped the trinket quickly over her neck and under the wetskin before she could change her mind.

The weather was cooler this morning and overcast, with the wind teasing the waves into whitecaps. Today they were going to search the reef again since it seemed to be the best bet. The boat bumped at the dock as she fumbled with the mooring lines. Far out, almost around the point of the main island, she saw another boat, larger than the one she'd been assigned.

Glancing back at Wong, she saw that one of the other scientists had come to stand beside him. The two men talked animatedly, but the wind blew their words away. As she watched, they both turned and hurried off the dock.

Putting Wong out of her mind, she started the boat's engine and followed JJ through waves as dark as burgundy wine. The further out they went, the rougher the sea became. Spray flew past her in a fine, shining mist. She touched a button and the hydrofoil rose up off the water, gathering speed.

"*Waiting, you, here,*" the dolphin sent as they neared the place where she'd seen the decapod. "*Scouting, we. Approve?*"

"Approve."

The hydrofoil settled down to the surface again, bobbing in heavy chop. JJ disappeared under the waves and Alyn waited. After a while, he returned, chattering in alarm.

"*Looking, we. Finding/not! Coming, storm. Going/back, we? Approve?*"

She picked up fieldglasses and searched a horizon which rose and fell monotonously. The boat the scientists were using was still visible; they were as far from the main island as she, apparently not concerned by the weather. That seemed encouraging.

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She started the engine again and puttered slowly, meeting the waves at an angle. In the lee of the island she dropped anchor. This morning she opened the computer link, wanting a record of what she might find.

Settling the goggles over her eyes and pulling up the face flap, she slipped over the side of the boat into dark water that seemed sharply colder than yesterday even through the protective layer of her wetskin, though not as cold as the North Atlantic where she'd learned to dive. She followed the anchor cable down.

The dolphin led her through the now-familiar curtain forest. Small, triangular creatures with mottled shells rapidly buried themselves in sand at her approach. No decapods. JJ nosed into all the possible spaces where they might hide.

Then she suddenly caught sight of one hovering a few meters ahead. She advanced cautiously. It stayed put, one tentacle curled around a flat shell. Now the distance between them was no greater than arm's length. Something glimmered faintly — the foil ring. Her heart hammered.

The decapod extended the shell with the sharpened edge, and when she hesitated, placed it on the sand in front of her. Careful not to frighten the ILF, she picked the shell up. It had been polished smooth till it gleamed like mother-of-pearl. Two shell gifts in one day, she thought; perhaps that was a good omen.

This time when she reached for the pouch the decapod didn't dart away. She put the shell inside and cautiously tumbled the board and the shapes onto the sand. The decapod spun slowly in place, watching her from each of its many eyes in turn.

Then JJ swooped in front of her and she heard the garble of his transmission over the link.

"Going/back, now! Going/quick! Approve?"

He flashed away before she could answer him. The decapod, startled by the dolphin's agitated movement, disappeared in a cloud of sand.

Dwarf dolphins were skittish at times, she knew; JJ had simply chosen a poor moment to tire of working. She certainly wasn't ready to leave now. The creature had demonstrated more with that exchange of gifts than she could've hoped, but the Guild insisted on redundancy. She arranged the test set she'd brought in a line beside the plastic board and waited.

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After a while, her patience was rewarded. The decapod came back, hovered over the shapes, selected a cone, and inserted it into the appropriate hole in the board. Then as if to demonstrate its scorn at such an infantile test of its abilities, it rapidly filled the remaining holes with correct shapes, spun in place, eyes glowing, and shot away again.

Enough evidence for PETAL to block IW-Bio immediately. And more — the scholars at the Mother House would be interested in this previously unknown intelligent being. The Guild collected languages and treasured evidence of sentience wherever it was found. Her pleasure was tainted by regret for what it would mean to Rob, but he'd reminded her she had no alternative.

Time to go. Immediately she saw that she'd obviously swum too far from the anchor cable today; she couldn't find it anywhere. Better to surface somewhere, she decided, and then look for the boat. She drifted slowly back up through black water.

The chop slapped against her face as she surfaced. It was late afternoon and the weather had worsened; gray clouds roiled overhead and thunder boomed in the distance. The sea rose and fell, tossing her like seaweed. Pushing the wetskin back off her head, she trod water, gasping at the shock of cold air that flooded her lungs. She looked round for the boat, anxious to get on board and set out for dry land. She couldn't see it.

"JJ! Where are you? Where's the boat? What's happened to it?" she sent.

"Seeking, seeking! Help. Men. Boat. Help. Approve?"

The dwarf's panic transmitted itself to her. She saw heaving walls of dark water in every direction. The boat couldn't have drifted away; she'd anchored it securely, and the anchor cable was made of flexible plastisteel, strong enough to withstand just about anything. It wouldn't just give way. The cable would have to be deliberately cut. As a large wave lifted her, she searched the horizon for the other dive boat she'd seen earlier. It was gone.

"They'd like to see you fail," he'd warned her. Somebody wanted her to drown out here.

JJ appeared beside her, nudging her arm. The thing to do was dive back under the turbulence; the Venatixi wetskin would keep her warm and supplied with oxygen indefinitely. But she was tired now, and the thought of submerging again into the darkness became suddenly unappealing;

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she'd rather take her chances on the surface. She considered the distance they'd come today. The main island couldn't be that far away.

Pounded by the force of the waves, she made little progress. JJ nosed under her, lifting her. It was slow going; the reef sank out of view behind them, but she still couldn't see the coastline of the main island. After a while, a larger rock loomed ahead of her, and she scraped her shins. Maybe if she pulled herself up, gained a little height, she could check how far offshore she was. Clinging to the slick surface with one hand, she slipped off the fins and tossed them higher up. Then she found a toehold in a crack just below the waterline and pulled herself up. She couldn't see the shore in the gloom.

"JJ. Go. Get help," she said. "Fetch Rob Wong."

The dwarf darted off. Nothing for it but to wait until the sea calmed down. As she heaved herself out of the water, her right foot caught in the crevice she'd wedged it into, and her ankle wrenched painfully before coming free. She collapsed face down on the rock, gasping, as waves washed over her.

On the horizon, the black sky split open with jagged lightning. Rain stung her face, but the storm seemed to be moving away from her. The rock offered little shelter; she couldn't stay here long. She felt drained, woozy with pain —

She jerked alert, scared of losing consciousness and being swept off the rock before JJ could fetch Rob.

Exhausted, she yawned and closed her eyes again for just a moment.

SHE AWOKE TO FIND herself almost upside down, legs higher than her head, arms dangling over the rock into the sea. Her injured ankle ached. She'd been dreaming. Her brother sat in the heather on Skye with his little daughter, handing the child triangular seashells and naming them. Dwarf dolphins called to them from a jade-green sea.

"*Language* per se," the Guild taught, "*is not a marker of sentience, though no sentience occurs without it.*" To which Magister Tien had added a footnote in the Guild's second century: "*We haven't enough samples yet to consider this an absolute.*"

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A jolt of cold water splashed her face, bringing her fully into the present. Her body cramped and every muscle complained, but the wetskin had kept her warm through the night. Judging by the faint streak of salmon pink on the charcoal sky it must be close to dawn. A sharp breeze swept the remnants of last night's storm out to sea.

She pushed back from the water and attempted to shift the position of her legs. The uninjured leg seemed to be stuck at the high point on the rock, and she struggled to get it loose. Something held it fast. A thin, rope-like something.

A decapod crouched above her, tentacles spread wide, holding on to the slick surface. Its body had adopted the mossy color of algae-covered rock. The tentacle anchoring her leg wore a ring.

She waggled her leg and the decapod released her. A tremor passed through the creature and the mouth slit opened; it gave a hoarse, breathless kind of moan, then lapsed into silence. The cool breeze carried a pungent smell to her nostrils of rotting kelp and musk.

"Thank you," she said, hoping the decapod would understand the impulse if not the words.

She righted herself and sat on the rock, left knee clasped under her chin, the other straight out, ankle throbbing. The sprained ankle was swollen and she guessed it wouldn't support weight. The wetskin had stretched tight over it like an elastic bandage; otherwise, the swelling would've been worse.

Dogs on Earth had been known to save their owners' lives, and altruism wasn't unknown in other intelligent ILFs around the Arm. The Guild never accepted that as sole proof of sentience. There were far more rigorous standards this amphibian would have to meet to earn that judgment. For a moment, she entertained the fantasy of the decapod installed in the Mother House and her teachers studying it.

The decapod touched her arm. Farther up the rock, she saw what looked at first like a small twist of sodden, gray cord. Then she realized she was looking at another decapod, much smaller than the first, perhaps an infant. There seemed to be something wrong with it.

She crawled cautiously up the treacherous rock. The adult decapod moaned again. The infant didn't move. She counted the tentacles twice. Six, not ten; two seemed normal, but the others were stunted and

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misshapen. The infant's slit mouth was open, and pus oozed from the lifeless eyes.

From the top of the rock, a large, tree-covered island became visible, and she could see the stark buildings of the compound looming above the mud. The enormity of IW-Bio's carelessness hit her. At her feet, the decapod wrapped its tentacles around the dead infant. She hoped this intelligent animal didn't understand the death sentence it had been given because any future offspring it might have were doomed too.

There had to be consequences. The fired tech was right. IW-Bio must've known of the existence of the decapods; they must've realized they couldn't keep the virus in check for long. She often felt the Guild was unnecessarily harsh in the way it trained lingsters, yet it was always ethical. The Guild had written the Codes the worlds of the Arm subscribed to, and the Codes had been trampled here. IW-Bio must be brought to trial.

And Rob too?

Standing cautiously on the slick stone, weight on her good leg, she contemplated the main island. Still a fair distance away, but she was a strong swimmer. Would be, she corrected herself, if she hadn't sprained her ankle. She looked for the fins she'd tossed on the rock; the waves had apparently washed them off during the night, so she'd have to make the swim without their help. And if JJ encountered anyone other than Wong, he might not be allowed to come back for her. In any case, she couldn't wait here any longer.

She lowered herself over the edge of the rock into the water and started swimming. She hadn't gone far when she became aware of the decapod beside her, its body inflating and deflating like a bellows.

The sun burned high overhead when her toes scraped on the bottom, and little remained of yesterday's cloud cover. Low tide under the pilings left the lab buildings high above water. Beside her, the decapod bobbed in the surf, sunlight spangling the bulbous head.

"This is as far as you go," she explained, touching the amphibian lightly. The skin felt warm under her fingers. "I have to do the rest myself."

On the long swim she'd had a chance to think. Lingstering was a

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dangerous game, and lingsters often found themselves in jeopardy of one sort or another. Fortunately, the Guild had anticipated emergencies such as this, and just as there were protocols for interface turned suddenly hazardous, there were procedures for persuading locked computers or hostile AIs to send a mayday message if a lingster could find no other way.

Using her link to connect through the computer was out of the question, for whoever had left her out there to drown might intercept her message. Instead, she'd need to find a key pad like Rob had used to send a private, coded message. If she could find her way into a lab she could probably locate one easily.

Cold water had helped her ankle. She picked her way over ooze that stank of rot and decay into shadow under the pilings. From the position of the sun she guessed it must be about lunchtime, and with luck, few people would be about.

The suck and squelch of mud behind her made her turn. The decapod made its way up the beach, walking like a spider, head high over skinny legs, its body mottled brown now like the mud, trailing its sour odor. One tentacle touched her leg as if in supplication, and the slit mouth opened silently.

On the underside of one of the smaller buildings, she saw a trapdoor used to haul items out of the water at high tide. She pushed — it wasn't locked. Heart thumping, she opened the trapdoor partway, listening for sounds but hearing none. Cautiously, she hooked her fingers over the frame and pulled herself up.

The room was unoccupied and seemed to be an office, not a lab. She eased herself inside and looked around. A desk, a swivel chair, a screen on the wall, a shelf heaped with computer cubes and a line of six two-liter plastiglass jars used to keep lab samples. On the desk top lay a large collection of shells, sorted according to color and shape, as if some potential Darwin had been at work here establishing a taxonomy of alien mollusks in his spare time. The cool air carried the metallic signature of unknown chemicals.

Then her gaze caught on one of the lab jars. Floating in the clear preserving fluid was a grotesque little creature. The limbs were all of different lengths, and the head was elongated and twisted, almost

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unrecognizable. Only the ring of blank eye sockets marked it as an infant decapod.

At first, she didn't make sense of what she was seeing. Then, in growing dismay, she glanced from this misshapen thing to the jar beside it on the shelf. The monster it contained was worse than the first. The same discovery awaited her all down the row.

"Mynah's children," a lingster had called them long ago: casualties of the virus. But these pathetic victims couldn't have been the result of accidental infection. Now it was obvious why someone had tried to kill her by taking her boat. She'd worried the virus could escape by chance, but they'd wanted to hide something far worse. Here were the results, she thought, displayed like obscene trophies.

The adult decapod pulled itself through the trapdoor and seemed to gaze at the jars too. They were evidence of an atrocity the Codes had been designed to prevent, Codes which IW-Bio had criminally ignored. Alyn stood clumsily, blundering into the side of the desk, her vision blurred from tears she was too angry to shed. PETAL had been right to send her, but it was too late.

A key pad that would fit in the palm of her hand lay on the desk beside the ordered shells. She seized it and touched her fingers rapidly to its surface. Her fingers shook as she tried to enter the sequence without error and it took several attempts to get it right. Communication over such immense distances was not instantaneous. Her signal must bounce at light speed from relay to relay across space, and the reply would hardly travel faster.

Then she heard the sound of a door opening. Fear laced through her anger as she turned. Rob Wong stood in the doorway, wearing a pair of faded work dungarees. Behind him, she glimpsed a sky now blue and cloudless. Relief flooded over her.

"Thank goodness it's you! Somebody tried to kill me — " She broke off, belatedly realizing he had a gun in one hand.

His face was almost as ashen in color as the decapod had first been. "What're you doing in my office?"

"*Your* office?" She stared at him, realization growing. "Then these — "

"I tried to explain. I couldn't find the right words. These were the result of my failures."

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His failures. He used the word so casually. Anger brought hot blood up into her face. "The Codes explicitly forbid — "

"What option did I have? Vaccines have to be tested, and there's *no way* to test them without ultimately sacrificing *somebody*. Computer modeling can never be the whole answer. Would you rather I'd endangered a human subject?"

Don't get involved in false argument, she warned herself. Concentrate on duty. In the face of this disaster, PETAL would want her to save however many decapods she could. "Where're you keeping the adult subjects?"

"There aren't any left." He began to pace the office nervously as he spoke, the gun, forgotten, pointing at the floor, the fingers of his free hand clenching and unclenching. "I couldn't free them once they were infected. You must understand that, Alyn. They carried the virus. Those that survived, I had to kill. Don't think it was easy for me! I would rather have killed myself."

The anguish she'd seen on his face when he'd spoken of his own dead child had come back, and she believed his words. What he'd done sickened her, yet she couldn't avoid weighing the alternative he'd looked at, the trail of horrifying death the virus left from world to world, his own fatally damaged child.

He stopped pacing abruptly and glanced at the decapod crouched at Alyn's feet. His voice trembled as he said, "They're clever animals, you see. One escaped."

Surely no one understood the nightmare better than Rob; small wonder he'd been over-zealous stalking this killer. And the last time she'd seen him, she reminded herself, she'd been eager to compromise too.

"What were you doing in here?" His gaze turned to the key pad she still held. "You wanted to send your report to PETAL to shut me down?" He smiled without humor. "You're too late. Yesterday we confirmed our first tentative results. We've found the vaccine to stop *Mynah A*."

He'd pulled it off, conquered the killer. Who was she to say there was another way to win the war? Who could count the dead before another way was found? What had happened here was reprehensible, even in the service of such an admirable goal, but she'd lost the right to judge him. Yet she knew someone would, someone who might not take into account the

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torment that had driven him. The Guild in its monastic isolation taught its lingsters to follow logic. Life outside the Mother House was not so unambiguous.

"They'll need my testimony against you," she said slowly. "I could refuse to give it..."

He stood by his desk, picking up and replacing tiny shells one by one, searching for something. He said quietly, "You weren't supposed to come back."

Somewhere in the conversation she'd already guessed the truth; she felt more sadness than shock. "You knew they would take my boat."

"I'm sorry. It wasn't personal. I like you. Maybe if we'd met somewhere else — "

He held out the mate to the shell he'd given her earlier, and she could imagine the tiny mauve pair hanging from her ear lobes. She put her hand up between them, rejecting the gift. He replaced the shell on the desk without comment.

"The work was my responsibility," he said. "I accept the consequences of violating the Codes. But I had to protect my team. You see, I'd observed certain behavior — The decapods seemed to be signaling to each other."

Language was the greatest tool of them all. Even in the midst of catastrophe, her training spoke: "Tell me how?"

"Some kind of visual system. Kinesic. Light pulses."

She thought of the decapod's display when she'd alarmed it on that first encounter. Given time, she could've learned to communicate. She leaned against the shelf behind her, and her shoulder brushed against one of the jars; she heard the slosh of preserving fluid as the contents shifted. Her stomach knotted at the slaughter and the lost opportunity both.

"I knew you would've decided they're sentient," he said. "And I couldn't take the risk of your trying to shut me down. It wasn't my finest decision."

He damned himself further with every word he spoke. He'd killed a sentient species in his quest to defeat *Mynah A*, and he would've killed her too because she stood in his way; he should pay for his actions. Yet some treacherous part of her still insisted he was a good man — She felt as if she were being ripped in two.

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She was a lingster; she would cling to what she'd been taught. She closed her eyes briefly as the lingster's mantra rose in her mind. *"I am a vessel — I am a reed — Through me flows the meaning of the universe — "*

The Guild had never let her down and it didn't now. Calmer, she said, "Rob, put the gun down."

"Several hundred years ago on Earth, they hammered out a doctrine that specified what humans could do to each other in the name of science. That's where your Codes began."

She stared at him, unable to respond to his words. In her hand, the key pad pinged. She ignored it.

"In my desk you'll find a signed letter exonerating the rest of the team," he said. "I accept full and sole responsibility for what was done here."

When her eyes recovered from the dazzling flash of the laser, she saw him lying below the row of jars with their pathetic contents. There was a small, round, bloodless hole in his right temple. Shaking, she knelt beside him. She bent down, feeling for a pulse in his neck but found none. As she did, she felt the scrape of the tiny shell under her wetskin and pulled it out. She coiled the cord and closed his dead fingers around the shell.

The decapod came spider-walking toward her, its odor making her gag. She stood up, hollow as an empty shell, but there were things that must be taken care of. The decapod had suffered enough; time for it to go home. Then she had a thought: what if there were none of its kind left for it to find out there? She'd only encountered the one decapod, easily identifiable with the child's ring. Perhaps they'd been a small population to begin with. Since this one escaped after being infected, it could've spread the virus, and a vaccine would be too late to help it or any others. To return it to the ocean might be to doom it to a lonely existence, last of its kind.

The decapod extended a tentacle and touched her leg. Then it walked slowly toward the trapdoor.

"Wait!"

If she took it back to Earth, the Guild would care for it. The knowledge the Guild gained from studying the decapod's language might be invaluable, perhaps even leading to discoveries as magnificent in their way as

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Rob's vaccine. Each language contained part of the answer to the great mystery of mind. Every new one encountered in the Arm was a cause for rejoicing in the Mother House. What metaphoric explanations for Time's passage might a dendropod contribute? Perhaps no one-way arrows for a being that saw front and back together. And how would this amphibian's spatial orientation affect its explanation of Space? Something of value could come out of this nightmare.

On Earth, it would be an exhibit, a curiosity, and more than ever alone.

As if it understood, the decapod hesitated. Alyn gazed down at it, remembering how it had accompanied her back to the lab. If she truly believed the decapod was sentient — and how could she not? — then it wasn't her decision to make. Sentient beings were autonomous, even when they chose to go to their own death. In the universe, the Guild taught, there was no brighter glory than the mind's shining.

The little creature touched her ankle again, the circle of milky eyes studying her. Rob had done his duty as he saw it — she added the loss of Rob to that of her brother, to be mourned over later, when there was time — Now she must do hers.

She held up her arms in a gesture of release. The decapod gave a small shudder, then lowered itself through the trapdoor in the floor and disappeared. The last thing Alyn saw was the glitter of the foil ring.

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Wildest Dreams, by Norman Partridge, Subterranean Press, 1998, $40.

The Boar, by Joe R. Lansdale, Subterranean Press, 1998, $40.

WE'VE spoken before in this column of the great service that many speciality presses do in getting, or bringing back into print, work that might not be worthwhile for one of the major houses to publish, but still deserves an audience, so I won't go into it at length again. Instead, I'd like to take a look at a pair of offerings that recently appeared in my post office box from Subterranean Press, one of the more active of these publishers.

I know Norman Partridge more for his wonderfully strange mystery novels such as *Saguaro Riptide* than for his horror. In *Wildest Dreams*, he proves to be just as accomplished (and strange) with the latter as he introduces us to Clay Saunders, a paid assassin who can see ghosts. Makes it sort of disconcerting when you can continue to interact with your victims after their death.

The novel opens with Saunders returning from a job in Mexico to collect his fee in a Californian coastal town. He was hired by Circe Whistler, an occult practitioner best described as a tattooed Elvira-like evangelist for Satan, to kill her father so that she can take over his business of gathering souls for Old Nick. Initially welcomed onto her estate, Saunders soon finds himself on the run from a murder charge, held hostage by the ghost of the elder Whistler, and bound by a promise he made to the ghost of a little girl that he met on the way to his meeting with Circe.

Part hard-boiled thriller, part grisly horror, part tender character study, *Wildest Dreams* is one of those remarkable and engrossing novels that fits no category but its

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own. I literally had to read it in one sitting.

While Subterranean Press's big Lansdale book is the first edition of *Rumble Tumble* (the latest entry in his Hap and Leonard series, also available in a more affordable trade edition from Mysterious Press), I was much more taken with the first appearance of *The Boar*, an early, previously unpublished novel that's been sitting for far too long in the author's file cabinet. This is a riveting, coming-of-age story set in Lansdale's beloved East Texas during the Depression in which a teenage, would-be writer, living on a dirt-poor farm, faces off against a menacing killer boar that lives deep in the bottoms wild country.

It's a fairly straightforward, linear tale and the end section, where the novel's young protagonist and his friend face off against the monstrous boar, is harrowing and edge-of-the-seat. But what makes the book shine for me is how Lansdale evokes the era, the voices of the characters, the details with which he brings this part of East Texas so fully to life. I was reminded of classic YA novels such as *The Yearling* or *Old Yeller*, simple tales with great heart, and *The Boar* has easily become one of my favorite Lansdale books to date.

Long-time Lansdale aficionados will appreciate the author's introductory essay detailing *The Boar*'s unpublished history and his personal connection to the locale and times of the novel.

Also recently published by Subterranean Press is *Crypt Orchids*, a new collection of short stories by David J. Schow, as well as single-story chapbooks by Chaz Brenchley and David B. Silva. If your local bookshop can't get these for you, or for more information, contact the press at P.O. Box 190106, Burton, MI 48519.

Spectrum 5, edited by Cathy Fenner & Arnie Fenner, Underwood Books, 1998, $25.

The *Spectrum* series is to fantastic art what the St. Martin's Press editions of *The Year's Best Science Fiction* and *The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror* are to prose: a subjective collection of the best visual work in the field, chosen in this case by a six-member jury of the artists' peers.

The book is as classy as any art gallery-quality catalog, and the production values are superb, featuring rich, full-color reproductions on glossy stock with sewn bindings. In an opening essay, Arnie

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Fenner provides an overview of the year, but from then on the only text is what accompanies the images: artist's name, title, medium, size, and so on. Lastly, there's a very useful artists' index including contact information.

What about the art itself? As might be expected, it's all of a very high quality in terms of rendering, although whether a particular piece actually appeals to the viewer is naturally an individual matter.

One of the things I like about this series is how it introduces me to artists with whom I'm unfamiliar, especially those from outside the field who work with fantastical, or simply imaginative, images. I also tend to be drawn to the more painterly artists such as Thom Ang, Kent Williams, Dave McKean, Greg Spalenka, and the like, where the brushmarks show and the images grow out of fascinating patchworks of anything from found objects to startling discourses of pure color. The realists don't interest me as much, unless it's someone like Rafal Olbinski with his startling perspectives and the way he plays with the viewer's expectations.

The problem with the realistic painters is that many of them still seem to be locked into outdated depictions of buxom naked or nearly naked women, lusty barbarians, noble bards, dragons, and other tired mythological imagery. Sometimes the variation is only that they're put into a science fictional setting. So no matter the genre, what we too often get is all those same tired poses and characters that we've seen on far too many books in the sf/fantasy section of our local bookstores.

But I'm not particularly disappointed by their presence here. Just as when visiting a gallery, where I don't expect to like everything that's hanging on its walls, there is enough pleasing, startling, imaginative, disturbing, and fascinating work in this collection to make the entrance fee easily worthwhile.

Still, speaking of the same-old, same-old makes for a perfect segue into:

The Tough Guide to Fantasyland, by Diana Wynne Jones, DAW Books, 1998, $5.99.

This is a hilarious spoof on the well known "Rough Guides" travelogue and encyclopaedia series published in the UK, offering easy-to-follow hints on how to survive a visit to Fantasyland (a pastiche of pretty much every fantasy novel published since Tolkien). Like

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much British humor, the writing is witty throughout and the humor rises naturally from the material, rather than relying on pratfalls or punchlines. In other words, it's Monty Python more than the Three Stooges.

The entries are set up in alphabetical order for easy reference and cross-indexed throughout. In many ways this book makes an excellent companion to the more serious *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* published in 1997. And Jones's book is funny. I won't bother to quote favorite bits, but there are plenty, as you can see for yourself if you simply open a copy in your local bookstore and read an entry at random.

But a funny (as in odd) thing happened to me as I continued to read. While I kept laughing, underneath the laughter a certain depression began to set in because every funny bit (check out the entry on horses, for example) started to remind me of a novel — no, of many novels — in which these same improbabilities, and just plain mistakes, were cheerfully presented in the course of the story in all seriousness.

Now I realize that we've built up a certain number of stereotypical characters, settings, and plots in high fantasy novels over the years, but until I read this book, I didn't realize just how bad it had gotten. You know — how you can miss the most obvious thing until someone points it out to you?

I'm not speaking of the actual prose now, and certainly many authors aren't guilty, but every high fantasy author should read this, and study it carefully, to avoid making, or propagating, the same errors and stereotypes. Many of your readers will be reading it as well, and after doing so, they'll undoubtedly be much less forgiving than they have been in the past when any of these elements showed up in one of your books.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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Musing on Books

Michelle West

A Fold in the Tent of the Sky, Michael Hale, Morrow, 1998, $25.

Dragon, Steven Brust, Tor, 1998, $22.95.

Hogfather, Terry Pratchett, HarperPrism, 1998, $24.

A *Fold in the Tent of the Sky* takes place in the here and now, or as close to the here and now as fiction generally gets when it assumes that extrasensory powers are demonstrably real. Hale has clearly done his research, and I suppose it's a personal tick of mine that makes it easier in some ways to suspend my disbelief for magic, for instance, than it is for psychokinetic talent. I'm not sure why; I think the shadow of self-proclaimed psychics like Uri Geller hang like a guillotine over my sense of wonder.

For that reason, it took me some time to work my way into the novel, but Hale's quirky and entirely honest use of his fictional psychic talents in underlining and exposing very human traits won me over. This is not a fast read. Some books move so quickly sheer momentum yanks you off your feet and drags you along; some, more deliberate, require you to adjust to their pace, their view. Hale's is one of the latter.

Peter Abbott and Simon Hayward are the anchors of the unfolding story. Peter Abbott is a man who can touch things and see into the minds of the people who owned them, who last touched them. It makes relationships difficult; he's not by nature a voyeur, and privacy as a one-way barrier doesn't seem to work for him. A not-quite failed actor, he's approached by Calliope — the company, not the muse — and offered a job. Doing what? What he's "good at." The psychic work. The talent he's done his best to hide all his life.

Simon Hayward is a very failed

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diver. Once Olympic material, he had an accident at a diving meet where he was *this* close to winning, and it costs him the only career he ever wanted. He doesn't settle for second best; instead, as if the world were the watery element he had mastery of, he drifts from place to place, trying hard to avoid the same psychic noise that troubles Peter Abbott. He, too, is found by Calliope and offered the dream job. The second-best job. Armed with the gold St. Christopher's medallion his mother gave him on the day he lost everything, he accepts the offer.

They meet in the Caribbean, part of a test group that also includes a woman named Pam who can travel up and down the psychic timeline (popping into a séance and possessing a non-believer, for instance), Ron, a man who can see enough of the future that he plays horses to get by, Larry, a dowser of sorts, and Anita. Under the watchful eye of Eli Thornquist, they begin the experiments for which they are paid by some unnamed corporate sponsors in search of information.

The nature of the information: remote viewing. Seeing into the past, into the present at a distance, possibly into the future — or the possible futures.

Unfortunately, no one's mother is along to tell the experimenting psychics that you see with your eyes and not with your hands. It's not long — not long at all, until someone discovers that it's actually possible to materialize *in* the past.

Simon Hayward is a fast learner. He waits only long enough to let someone else make the big mistake before he starts out on his own time-traveling. The Universe doesn't like it, of course, and if you force a paradox on it, it will iron out the paradox in the neatest possible way — the path of least resistance. A good example of paradox? Existing in the same timeline, or worse, the same geographical location, as your younger self. But if you can avoid that...you can remake the world. Not in the way it should have been, but maybe enough so that you can finally get what you want.

Unfortunately, when you can play in the past, you can decide the future — and the past is a great place to ripple the fabric of reality in such a way that it shakes loose the people you'd rather not have standing beside you — or over your shoulder — in the present.

This isn't a murder mystery; it's a very unusual serial-killer book

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as a young man with a lot of anger and very little conscience tries to assert his grip on the future by destroying parts of the past.

Hale has a lot to say, in a subtle fashion, about who we are and where we come from, about the effect of the past on the present in a personal as well as a broad way. One of the most interesting parts of the book is the way that reality shifts just enough that as a reader one isn't certain which little details from the beginning of the book have completely disappeared, to be metamorphosed or swallowed by the changing nature of reality.

It's an interesting, thoughtful, quirky book.

You don't get much better than Steven Brust. I say this with a certain amount of envy, admiration, and bafflement. Hold that thought.

I have spent the last three weeks in a no-sleep zone while ear infections, eye infections, sinus infections, stomach flu, and teething pain have, in one combination or another, felled my entire nuclear family. I have picked up — again, and I realize I apologize for this a lot — a number of very worthy books, read the first few pages, and realized that I couldn't actually remember three consecutive sentences.

Dragon crossed the threshold a couple of weeks ago. I confess that I haven't followed the latter adventures of Vlad Taltos as closely as I did the first few because I thought they slowed down somewhat; they were missing some of the consistent frenetic charm that characterized the early Vlad & Loiosh encounters for me. My first thought — and I imagine it's the first thought of a lot of Brust's *Jhereg* readers — was, "Oh look, a hardcover. I wonder if the book is worth the extra change."

Yes.

Absolutely, positively, one hundred percent yes.

About three sentences into the book, I was captivated. Lack of sleep? Hah. I laughed at lack of sleep. Inability to pay attention? Hah. I woke up, I sat up, I laughed a *lot*, smiled wryly a bit more, and had a terrific time. Just what I wanted.

I could leave matters at that. It's all true, and I suspect that's the most germane element of the book for a majority of Brust's readers. But damn is Brust brilliant.

This book could be subtitled: How Vlad Joined The Army and Learned to Love It, or At Least Not to Despise It Utterly.

Brust starts in the middle of

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the story, and then begins to circle its heart as if it's protected by a thin line of spearmen. He can get through to the center if he's quick enough, and if he's clever enough, but if he's going to survive it, he has to get a better view of what's there. Approach and retreat, approach and retreat, Brust jumps back and forth in time the way a conversation between two friends who've got a lot to catch up on, and just a tad too little time to do it in, will. Two friends, I hasten to add, who know each other's flaws and failings perfectly, who are not above poking fun about them, but who maintain a strong affection regardless.

In terms of pacing, this is easily up to, and possibly better than, any other novel in the longstanding series. In terms of that aforementioned frenetic charm, the same. But Brust's wit, his clever ability to deliver the goods in a way that's both structurally complicated and so utterly natural you don't have to notice how complicated it is if you don't want to, is the cut and polish to a perfect gem.

And speaking of strong affection, it's that time of year again. Pratchett time.

It's also a month away from Christmas at this writing, which makes *Hogfather*, the latest Pratchett offering, particularly timely. There isn't, so to speak, a Christmas tradition in Discworld — I mean, in a city like Ankh-Morpork, where suicide is defined as saying the wrong thing in the wrong place and, for example, ticking off a bunch of stupid but highly violent trolls, it's highly unlikely that you'd find someone who'd want to climb up on a wooden lower case "t" and have himself killed for the betterment of those around him.

But people will be people, and traditions will arise. Thus it is with Hogswatch night, when the Hogfather climbs aboard a sled pulled by flying pigs — flying *wild* pigs — with presents for the children and, well, you get the picture.

Now, Death is perhaps getting a tad sentimental. That's not his problem. What is: Someone has hired an assassin to do in the good old Hogfather, a feat which should technically be impossible, given the lack of his corporeal existence.

But this particular assassin gives *assassins* the willies. To be fair to him, he probably became an assassin because his name, "Teatime," drove him crazy (his parents aren't mentioned; justifiable

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homicide if he got rid of them as payback for the name, if you ask me), and as a crazy person he's actually quite creepy. Pratchett does many things in his books, but he rarely creates a character whom you constantly expect to do something unpleasant just for the...not fun of it, not precisely, because he's not the type of person who understands what fun is, but just because killing people is so natural to him.

Is the Hogfather real? Well, no. Can he be killed? Well, yes.

And in order to thwart the beings who would most benefit from the Hogfather's death, Death is sporting a beard, getting around by flying pig instead of the usual horse, and practicing the jolly sound of Ho Ho Ho. Although this is the most decidedly seasonal of Pratchett's books that I can recall (and keeping in mind what my memory is like), it's not a "special Christmas Discworld novel"; it's a Discworld novel that *also* happens to have a few things to say about the spirit of the holiday season, and why that frustrating over-commercialized spirit still *means* something.

There's something ironic about Death being the guardian of life as we know it, but Discworld is like that. Besides, while saving something less tangible than a life — which I think would, strictly speaking, be beyond Death's purview — he makes the Hogwatch rounds, getting into the seasonal spirit by visiting everyone's favorite Ankh-Morpork hot spots. The Watch shows up (and Nobby Nobs gets to visit the Hogfather and ask for his very own Hogswatch present — which is almost worth the price of admission). Death's niece, Susan, trying her hardest to live a normal life, does her best to avoid him, and the children she's governing — well, governessing — teach him a thing or two about monsters.

Pratchett's not a preacher, but he's got such a lovely way with words it's almost impossible not to listen to what he's saying along the way. As usual, this comes recommended.

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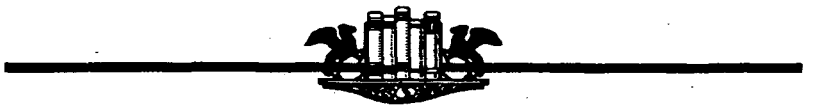

EDITOR'S RECOMMENDATIONS

IF YOUR reading this magazine indicates you have even the slightest interest in short fiction (I'll take that bet), then you should know that 1998 was an extraordinarily good year for story collections. A few highlights:

Last Summer at Mars Hill by Elizabeth Hand (HarperPrism) assembles an even dozen tales, stories with "heart and also sharp little teeth," as Tappan King cannily said when he bought the first.

Paul J. McAuley's *The Invisible Country* (Avon Eos) offers up nine stories decidedly sf with lots of sharp smart edges.

Likewise, Nancy Kress's *Beaker's Dozen* (Tor) showcases the work of one of the finest extrapolators in the field. Kress's thirteen stories see far.

Fans of old-time sf will welcome *First Contacts: The Essential Murray Leinster* (NESFA Press). Some of these stories creaked with age, and I regretted the absence of "The Runaway Skyscraper" from the book, but still this collection is an excellent way to see why Leinster was known as the Dean of SF.

The Cleft and Other Tales (Tor) brings together more than thirty years' worth of Gahan Wilson's odd fantasies. It's very nice to see this collection.

Joyce Carol Oates's *The Collector of Hearts* (Dutton) gathers more than two dozen dark stories from the past five years, including some from relatively obscure publications.

Burning Sky by Rachel Pollack (Cambrian Publications, P.O. Box 112170, Campbell, CA 95011) is available only in a small-press hardcover edition that deserves wider attention. Pollack mixes folklore, myth, and wit into wise concoctions.

Steven Utley once told me he tried writing to fit the genre magazines, but only felt comfortable when he decided just to write whatever he felt like writing. It's no

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surprise then that *Ghost Seas* (Ticonderoga Publications, P.O. Box 407, Nedlands, Western Australia 6009) rambles through the fields of fiction.

On the other hand, Paul Di Filippo continues to stake out his own literary territory by gathering up material he finds strewn throughout those fields of fiction (and culture). *Lost Pages* (Four Walls Eight Windows) collects nine stories that couldn't be mistaken for anyone else's work.

The Perfect Host (North Atlantic Books) is the fifth volume of Theodore Sturgeon's complete stories and in addition to masterpieces like "The Martian and the Moron" and "The Hurkle Is a Happy Beast," it also contains two unpublished pieces that are well worth reading.

However, with all due respect and then some, none of these books comes close to reaching the heights attained by *The Avram Davidson Treasury*, edited by Robert Silverberg and Grania Davis (Tor). This book's a terrific tribute to a tremendous talent. Go now. Read. Enjoy. Marvel. ☙

— *GVG*

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Around here we like to mark the start of the baseball season each April. However, as we go to press the baseball fans are still basking in the glow of the exciting 1998 season, and basketball fans are facing the prospect of having no season at all. So our favorite explorer of the magical realms of sports, Rick Wilber, has put aside his split-finger fastball for the fadeaway jumper and given us this moving and personal story of how some forms of truth can be found at the top of the key.

Imagine Jimmy

By Rick Wilber

JUST TOUCHING HER excited him. Sitting next to her at the morning meetings at WDA & Associates, accidentally bumping knees or shoes, he found himself getting excited, had to move in his chair to get himself more comfortable. So when she asked him over to her place for lunch yesterday he said yes.

He couldn't have imagined it any better. They never did get around to eating much of that lunch she'd made, some chicken and rice thing. Instead they bumped around in the kitchen, just making the slightest contact hip to hip or that light touch on the hand as he helped her with the salad, or that leaning over her from behind, feeling her dark hair against his cheek while they rinsed a couple of glasses at the sink.

The tension was electric, was palpable until she broke it with a nervous laugh and asked him if he felt it, too, and that led the two of them into an admittance of things they'd been hinting at for a month or more now at work.

They almost made love. Almost. But Robert, who doesn't think of

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himself as someone like this, who thinks of himself as a lot more down-to-earth than this, really, backed away at the last moment, right in step with Alice, who pushed him away, too.

They stood there, looking at each other for a long, long minute, saying nothing until Alice finally spoke, said "Oh, Robert."

He was dizzy, felt like it was all some weird out-of-body experience, that it couldn't possibly be real, couldn't be him standing there, watching himself watching her.

She reached out to touch his face, her fingers brushing his cheek lightly, stopping there for a second before she brought her hand back. "I need to think, Robert."

He nodded, trying to will it all to be real. "Yes, me, too."

"Give me the weekend to think about it, okay? Maybe we'll have lunch on Monday or something."

"Sure. Lunch. On Monday." It was about all he could manage to get said.

She laughed awkwardly. "I don't know, Robert. I've thought about this so much. I figured I knew what I wanted; but, it's just too much right now. Look, you have to go now, Robert, you really have to go."

So he left, slowly calming down, returning to reality.

Now, just a couple of hours later, he is still trying to piece together his recollection of it all as he drives to pick up his Down Syndrome older brother Jimmy at the group home, fighting the afternoon traffic to get there in time while he thinks about her, wondering if it all was real. It's almost like he imagined the whole thing, like it was a dream. He's tempted to call her just to check his own memory of it.

He's not proud of this, he tells himself, but he feels drawn to her somehow, like some satellite that circles around her, its orbit narrowing until it finally angles in sharply toward her.

And burns up as the atmosphere thickens. That's the problem, all the destruction that is possible here. Today's little lunch was at her place while her husband was out of town and her kids off in school.

Her husband, Robert thinks, and sighs. He's never met the guy, and is glad of that. And her kids. He shakes his head. Great kids, he met them once, quite accidentally, when he and Jimmy were at the mall one rainy Saturday afternoon. A boy about ten, and his little sister, a six-year-old as pretty as her mommy.

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Alice introduced him to them as her friend from work and his brother, and they all chatted politely for a minute about the new Disney movie (the boy officially found it boring, the girl thought it was wonderful) before the little girl's tugs on Mommy's hand took the family off toward the ice cream shop. Robert walked away slowly from that one, taking Jimmy by the hand then walking back out into the educational cold rain and his Mustang and the drive back to the group home.

Jimmy just looked at him as they drove, not saying much at first. Finally, "You like her, my brother?" he asked.

"Yeah, Jimmy. I like her. She's nice," Robert said, hoping that would end it.

"She has nice kids," Jimmy said, and smiled, added "I like them."

"And a nice husband, too, Jimbo," Robert added. "The kids' daddy, you know? Look, it's nothing, Jimmy, just don't worry about it, okay? Just let it go."

And Jimmy did, or seemed to, just nodding yes and then sitting back and getting quiet again before falling asleep as they drove the last couple of miles to the group home.

Alice is a big girl, dammit, Robert tells himself now as he's driving, and she says the marriage is rocky anyway, that her husband Nick isn't home much anymore and seems to have lost interest in her and all the rest. And, Robert thinks, if she didn't want this, all she had to do was say no.

And, Jesus, the excitement, the potential, was so explosive that he could hardly think about anything else. Earlier this morning, at the meeting, he had to force himself to concentrate on the project, about how much money they could make once the deal was done. Millions of dollars being talked about, millions risked, his career on the line, and what he was thinking about was how her skin might feel against his fingertips as he ran them along her back, her stomach, her breasts.

It's all suddenly moving way too fast for him, his imagination outrunning his reality, like that time in college when he came in off the bench against Ohio State and that Buckeye guard was so quick that Robert felt like his feet were lead, that time had changed somehow so that the guy was zipping by him in some frenzied, perfect, higher speed while Robert could only turn and watch. It was the worst basketball game of his mediocre college career and a nightmare he's never forgotten.

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Now, driving along, thinking about what might be about to happen, he's excited and fearful at the same time. He can hardly breathe.

He sucks in air slowly, deeply, trying to gain some control. He's glad to be picking up Jimmy, who is as down to earth as it gets, who can ground him, pull him down from all these light-headed imaginings. Jimmy, he thinks, will slow things down for him. Jimmy knows what's real and what isn't.

To get to Jimmy's group home Robert has made the seven-mile drive up 66th street. There are one or two lights every mile, and he has caught them all at red, every single one of them, and this is tourist season to boot, so the drive has taken nearly forty minutes, with Robert mumbling curses at the Ontario and Ohio plates the whole way, watching from behind, frustrated, as those gray heads bob in their huge, maroon Buicks, ambling toward wherever they are going on a Friday afternoon in Florida in March.

But now he's finally here. He shakes his head, takes another deep breath, trying to bring the world into focus as he pulls into the driveway of the Samuel Crockett Independent Living Facility, Jimmy's group home.

Jimmy, dressed in gray slacks, a red button-down shirt and that awful pink tie with the smiling cow on it that he likes so much, waits on the bench that sits outside the group home's front door, staring off into the distance. He has his favorite little athletic bag with him, the black one with the red Chicago Bulls emblem on it. Jimmy is a real Bulls fan. Robert likes the Celtics. It is a historic point of contention between the two.

Robert stops the Mustang by the bench, hits the power window switch and leans over that way to give Jimmy a shout.

"Hey, Jimbo. Ready to go, pal?"

Jimmy just looks over at him, slowly, his face in that serious expression he gets sometimes, eyes narrowed, mouth tight. Something's going on.

Then Jimmy seems to notice it's Robert and the whole world brightens.

"Hey, Roberto. What's going on, my brother? You okay?"

"Yeah, Jim, I'm fine. Sorry I'm a little late, brother, but I had some business and then the traffic was terrible. Man, these tourists!"

"Yeah," Jimmy says, opening the door and slowly easing himself in. "Yeah, these tourists!"

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Then he settles in, clicks the seatbelt into place, and looks at his younger brother. "You are late, my brother. I love you and I like you, but Mom said three-thirty o'clock and it is," he looks at his digital watch, "three-forty o'clock, my brother. That is late. We hurry now, okay? I can't miss it, confession."

Robert smiles. Time matters to Jimmy, seems to give him a sense of order, of organization, something he can control, so it's not surprising that he's a little upset that Robert is late.

Robert tries to explain it away. "Like I said, Jimmy, I'm sorry. It was bad traffic, you know? Lots of cars going slow."

Jimmy just nods, and slips back into the staring thing, looking out the window now as Robert pulls the Mustang back onto the main road, heading south on 66th Street, back toward Holy Innocents and confession. Every Friday at four in the afternoon Robert does this, takes Jimmy to confession. It's important enough that he juggles his lunch hours all week to do it, building up enough time that he can get out early on Friday, pick up Jimmy and get him over to Father Curran in his little booth.

The first light is green as they approach it, then goes amber and then red as they pull up to the broad white line marking the intersection.

"Damn," Robert says, downshifting.

"I not like it when you say that word, my brother," says Jimmy, coming out of his reverie long enough to let Robert know that he's listening. Robert just smiles, thinking Jimmy will probably add it to his list for confession — "Heard a bad word from my brother." Probably get him another Hail Mary.

Robert looks over and Jimmy's eyes have closed again. There's something about driving along that almost instantly lulls Jimmy into a half-sleep, a kind of meditative state. Over the years since Dad's death Robert has seen this hundreds of times, the peaceful look on that wide face, the flattened nose, the folds around the eyes. There's a slight drool from the mouth as Jimmy mumbles in his sleep.

God, Robert loves this guy. He's never understood how brothers could not get along, though he's heard it from his friends all his life, about the fights some brothers have, about how they drift apart over the years, never talking, not really knowing each other's successes and failures.

That's not the way things are with Robert and Jimmy, not even close.

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The kid needs him, damnit, and Robert's gotten a lot in return, too. The love he gets from Jimmy is amazing, the hugs and devotion, the joy.

Jimmy takes his responsibilities as the older brother very seriously. Back in high school when Robert was the shooting guard of the Crusaders, leading Catholic High to its best season in years, Jimmy was there at almost every game, home and away, cheering his brother on, telling everyone just who that was out there hitting those three-pointers, finishing up with a slam on the fastbreaks.

One game, against Cleveland High, Jimmy was sick and had to stay home. Robert was awful that night, hitting just one of eight from the field, giving up four turnovers, playing miserably the whole time. It was the only league game they lost all year, and Robert was the reason. He capped off the awful night by missing a pair of free throws with four seconds left when he could have tied the score. Jimmy blamed the loss on himself. Robert came home with the news and found Jimmy, flu and all, waiting up for him.

"I stunk it up, Jimbo," Robert told him. "I mean I was really awful."

"I so, so sorry I not there for you, my brother," Jimmy said in return. "Never again, okay? I promise, I always be there for you."

"Sure, Jimmy, you'll always be there," Robert said, worn out and depressed, though never too tired to talk to Jimmy.

That was fifteen years ago now, and seems even longer, but Jimmy still protects his baby brother.

They're within a block of Holy Innocents, so it's time to wake Jimmy up. Robert reaches over and shakes him gently on the knee. "Hey, Jimmy, time to wake it up, pal. We're almost there."

Jimmy stirs, those eyes open slowly. He smiles. "Holy Innocents?"

"That's it, Holy Innocents, Jimbo. Confession time."

Then Robert laughs as he makes the turn into the wide driveway of the church and heads up toward the parking area. "Hey, brother," he adds, "what's the big sin? You been messing around with the girls lately, or something?"

Jimmy just turns and looks at Robert for a moment, his face contorted, like he's struggling to find the words to say something.

Then he gives it up, just smiles, says, "I not tell you, Robert. It is *my* confession, and I need it, that is all."

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Whew, Robert thinks, serious stuff here. But what could be serious for Jimmy? The kid — hell, he is in his mid-thirties now but Robert still thinks of him as a kid — is as innocent as new snow, there just aren't any sins possible for Jimmy.

They pull into the space closest to the side door of the church. There are no other cars in the lot. "C'mon, brother," Robert says, "it can't be that serious, can it? What happened? Tell your little brother and maybe I can help, eh?"

Jimmy just stares, though, then slowly shakes his head and looks out the car window as Robert comes to a stop, turns the engine off and tugs on the parking brake. Then, while Robert watches, puzzled — can this quiet, worried guy be his brother Jimmy? — Jimmy gets out and walks into the church. Robert sits back to wait.

It takes maybe ten minutes, no more, and then Jimmy comes walking out, smiling now, obviously happier.

"Hey, my brother, I better now."

"Father Curran have some good advice for you, Jimbo?"

Jimmy looks at him, shakes his head. "This is confession, Robert, I not tell you. It is private."

Robert smiles, shoves the Mustang into reverse, pulls out of the spot and then heads for 66th street and the drive back north to the group home.

But when they get to the intersection to make that turn, Jimmy says, "Hey, Robert. Let's play it some basketball, okay? Me and you, brother, one on one."

Robert smiles. The two of them have been shooting hoops like this since they were kids. It's a kind of ongoing ritual, in Robert's mind, a frequent reminder of their connection to each other. Occasionally, it's even more than that, like the time Dad died in that stupid car wreck.

Coming home late from work, a summer thunderstorm with that torrent of heat-driven rain so thick you can't see where you're going, a little mistake on the interstate just where the bridge comes down from its elevated ramp over the waters of the bay onto that long stretch of fill land.

A little mistake, some sliding, some banging and crunching with that other car and that semi and that was that, off into the bay. There's only ten feet of water at that spot, Robert went out into it one day to see for himself. Did some skin-diving on that exact spot. But ten feet deep is all it takes

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when the car is on its side and you're trapped in there and no one can see where the car is and that, Robert remembers, was that. A dumb way to go.

A couple of months later, looking through his father's stuff from his office desk, Robert found out that Dad was making it with some woman, someone who signed her letters Licia.

He never told Jimmy, or Mom, about what he found. But Jimmy has a strange way of figuring things out, of sensing them somehow, and it all came out later in one of their brotherly basketball games, Jimmy winning like Robert always makes sure he does, and then Jimmy standing there, sweating in the late summer sun, crying hard, sobbing, saying stuff about Dad, about Mom, about Dad and women and what was going on. Robert, to this day, has no idea how the kid could have come up with it, but he did.

All this recollection and more, of the funeral, of the legal hassle, of the polite well-wishers and the money troubles and all the rest, flashes by in an instant when Jimmy mentions shooting the ball around, and then Robert says, "Yeah, that's a great idea. I got my stuff in the trunk, what about you?"

"I brought it my stuff, Robert. I am a ready guy. Let's shoot it some hoops."

"Okay, okay, Jimbo, but I got to warn you, I'm going to thump you good this time, pal. I'm due."

Jimmy laughs, "You watch it, my brother. Be a good sport, okay?"

And Robert laughs with him.

They are only a few minutes away from the Pass-a-grille courts, the ones in the little park across the street from the main beach, just up from the Hurricane Restaurant, the one where Dad first met that Licia woman, from what Robert read in those letters.

The off-shore breeze is blowing pretty good as they park, open the trunk and get out the ball and Robert's shoes and shorts and walk over to the court.

Jimmy has a great little jump shot, he's been a big star at the Special O's with that shot. But there won't be much outside shooting today, Robert thinks, as the two of them sit down on the bench and start putting on their shorts and shoes.

Jimmy laces his shoes up tight, and has that look on his face, so Robert

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knows this one is serious. Somehow, Robert figures, this connects up to going to confession, and Father Curran, and Holy Innocents and god knows what else, but Robert has no idea how or why.

Before Robert has finished lacing his first shoe, Jimmy is done and walking out toward the basket, dribbling the ball five times with his right hand and then five times with his left, the way his father taught him all those years ago. Dad was a heck of a player, was a starter in college, a forward for the Golden Gophers at Minnesota.

Robert has a framed picture of his dad from those playing days, that long right arm reaching up and out toward the rim, his body rising for a layup on a fastbreak, two Purdue Boilermakers hopelessly late behind him, both of them reduced to watching. The picture shows his father's certainty, at least for that moment.

Robert inherited some of those talents, enough of them to sit on the bench in college at any rate and get a free education in the bargain. That's more than most guys can say.

And Jimmy? Well, hell, Down Syndrome or not, he can play this game. Robert remembers watching Jimmy play in one Special Olympics game a couple of years back where the other team had some pretty good players and Jimmy's team really had only Jimmy.

Jimmy scored twenty-eight points in that game in a losing cause, keeping his team in the game with a series of steals that led to layups, and with a nifty little turn-around jumper that he hit seven or eight times. It was only in the last few minutes that the poor kid, worn out, just couldn't keep up the pace.

Robert was so proud of his brother that he ran onto the court after the game and lifted him up off the floor in celebration. Jimmy was embarrassed by that since his team, after all, had lost.

Jimmy's ready to play, so Robert finishes lacing them up and joins him on the court. Robert takes a couple of jumpers to loosen up, stretches out a bit doing a couple of toe touches and a few windmills with his arms, and then they go at it.

Jimmy opens the game with a furious drive, dribbling right past Robert and then laying it in for two.

Robert, still not really loose and ready to play, is surprised by his brother's intensity. So that's the way it's going to be, eh? He responds with

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a soft jumper from the free-throw line that goes cleanly through the net. Tie game.

It goes on like this for a while, the two of them playing even as they hit the ten-point mark, the fourteen, the sixteen-point mark in a game to twenty.

Robert, of course, is really a much better player and so controls the game. Jimmy, for all his excellence in the Special Olympics, is not nearly as quick or as strong as Robert, and so would lose every game if they played straight up.

But Robert hasn't played Jimmy straight up in fifteen years, not since they were just kids. Robert has always figured that Jimmy faces plenty of losses in life every day and doesn't need any from his brother, so Robert always makes sure that Jimmy wins these brotherly games. Then, afterward, they'll head over to Tastee Freeze for some ice cream so they can celebrate Jimmy's big victory.

Robert keeps it close every time, making sure he misses at critical moments, or that he has just the right lapse on defense to let Jimmy score a critical layup or two. Then, usually, toward the end of the game Robert takes a lead, then lets Jimmy make a dramatic comeback and win the game.

This is always cause for jubilation from Jimmy, arms outstretched in joy, that round face grinning before he runs over to shake Robert's hand, give him a big hug and tell him what a good player he is and too bad he couldn't win it.

Robert always just smiles. Good old Jimmy.

And this game goes that way, too, though Jimmy is working so hard, trying *so* hard, that Robert almost feels bad about not playing it dead seriously. He can't recall Jimmy putting this much into it in a long, long time.

At the end, Jimmy hits a long jumper, out from behind the three-point line, to win it, but then there is nothing of that victory dance that Robert is used to seeing, none of the joy.

Instead, Jimmy tosses the ball to Robert and says, "Okay, brother, let's play again. You try harder now, okay?"

And so Robert does try harder, putting a little more into the acting, making sure that he looks like he's really trying, making the victory worthwhile for Jimmy. This one is close, too, a one or two-basket margin the whole way until they approach the game's end at the twenty mark.

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Robert really gets caught up in it, lost in the game, putting a move on Jimmy here and there, hustling by his brother for a rebound, hitting that outside jumper consistently.

Then, toward the end, Robert backs in on Jimmy, protecting the ball as he moves in toward the goal, getting ready to take a little turn-around fadeaway jumper that should end it.

He finds his spot, gives a little head fake to the left and then spins around off the right leg and jumps. Perfect.

But Jimmy has backed off him, not gone for the fake and is up in the air, trying for a block.

He's reaching, straining upward, soaring higher and higher as the ball leaves Robert's fingertips.Jimmy gets there, slaps the ball away and then both brothers come down, sneakers squeaking against the hot pavement.

How did Jimmy do that? The kid cannot jump, he's never gotten up that high in his life. But there it was.

Jimmy retrieves the ball and Robert turns to face him. All right, then, this one's for real.

Jimmy gives a little fake to his left, then pulls up for the jumper. Robert comes at him and jumps to block it, but Jimmy doesn't leave his feet and, instead, stays down, puts the ball on the court to dribble and blows by Robert, heading toward the basket.

Robert watches, hung up there, useless, as Jimmy goes by, and then, as Robert comes back down he turns to see Jimmy, this thirty-three-year-old Down's kid, take a final dribble and grab the ball with both hands and plant both feet and then jump, up and toward the rim, soaring from underneath, straining, getting his fingertips over the rim, then his whole hand, then up past the wrist and slamming the ball home, a thunderous dunk, to win it.

Jesus Christ.

Robert doesn't know what else to say. A dunk? By Jimmy?

Robert just stands there as Jimmy comes down, feet flat against the court and then grabs the ball, turns to face his brother.

"I win," he says, simply.

Robert wonders if he just imagined all that. It has, after all, been that kind of day, one filled with vivid imaginings. Maybe it never happened, maybe it was just a layup, just another nice shot.

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"I win, but you tried hard, my brother. Good game." And Jimmy holds out his right hand for a game-ending handshake.

"Yeah, Jimbo. I tried hard, I always try hard." Robert shakes his head, then reaches out to take Jimmy's hand. "Did you just...?"

"I win it, my brother. I beat you."

"Yeah, Jimmy, you sure did." Robert is still replaying it, convincing himself now that it was just his imagination. God knows he's having trouble enough with that lately anyway.

"Father Curran says I have a good 'magination, Robert."

"Father Curran?"

"At confession. He tells me I have a good 'magination."

"What are you talking about?"

Jimmy stands there, dead serious, ball in his right hand, squinting in the hard, bright sun. "At confession, I tell Father Curran my sins and he tells me I have a good 'magination and say two Hail Marys."

"What did you confess, Jimbo?"

Jimmy just shrugs. "Father Curran says I should talk to my brother Robert about this. Father Curran says 'magination is fine, but not to get it confused with real stuff."

"Yeah, well, that's good advice, Jimmy. Don't get it confused."

Robert nods. "I thought so," he says.

And then, and as Robert stands there, puzzling through all this, Jimmy walks over and pats him on the back.

"You a smart guy, my brother. You got it?"

"Yeah, Jimmy, sure. I got it," says Robert, not sure if he does or not.

"Good man," Jimmy says, and then walks over to where they've left their towels.

Robert, though, doesn't walk that way. Instead, he stands there, looking at the rim, until Jimmy yells at him.

"C'mon, my brother. It is over now, right? Time for ice cream."

"Yeah, Jimmy, right," says Robert, replaying it all one more time, seeing Jimmy soaring in for that slam.

"Yeah," he says finally, turning away from the basket, turning to face his brother. "You're right. You're absolutely right. It's over."

And the two brothers head for some ice cream.

—for Jim Smith 1947-1996

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India Edghill lives in upstate New York and has sold short fiction to Catfantastic IV, Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine, *and other anthologies and magazines. She places the blame for this, her first* F&SF *story, squarely upon her father, who engendered her interest in both fantasy and war by reading her such arcane masterpieces as* Alf's Button *before she was old enough to object. (She also notes, a bit grumpily, that he later insisted she read* All Quiet on the Western Front, The Cruel Sea, *and* The Theory and Practice of Hell.*) Naturally, this story is for him.*

We Are the Dead....

By India Edghill

"The war will be over by Christmas."

— Famous last words

In Flanders fields

IF HE SURVIVED THE NIGHT, tomorrow would be his fourth Christmas Day in the trenches. He had survived three Christmases in this purgatory of mud and noise and blood they called the Western Front. Three ice-cold Christmas Eves, three frozen Christmas mornings. Surely he could manage to live long enough to mark one more anniversary of the birth of the Prince of Peace?

Already he had outlived his two brothers, his best friend, and half his classmates at Trinity. He had even outlived his youngest sister. Lily had been a VAD nurse; sacrosanct. A nine-inch shell had killed her and taken half a field hospital ward with her. That had been last spring, just before the brief cease-fire that had celebrated Easter.

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Simon firmly closed away the memories of the endless dead and he tried desperately to forget the count of his survival. It was bad luck. Instead, he bent once more to his self-imposed task: the creation of a star. A Christmas star; a beacon to mark the turn of another frozen year. For this year, this dead Christmas of 1917, there was to be a tree. Somewhere in the mud and despair in which they existed, Sergeant Bunter had found — no one had dared ask how — a holly tree. More of a bush, really, if one were honest, and a bush more dead than alive at that. But some of the holly leaves still greweth green —

"And parts of it are excellent," as Peter had gleefully remarked upon confrontation with the wretched object.

"So they are," Simon had said, and, "Well done, Sergeant."

And so for once they would keep a proper Christmas. Each man of Simon's squad had been told off to produce a suitable ornament for the miraculous tree —

"No questions asked or answered," Peter had carolled, and then giggled in a girlish fashion that would once have appalled Simon.

But such conventional reactions belonged to the living, not to the walking dead. Peter had come to France only two months ago, arriving at Simon's hard-won section of the trenches on November First —

"All Saints Day," the newcomer had informed Simon, and handed him the paperwork without which Those Above thought the war could be neither fought nor won. "But I'm no ghost, I assure you," he had added with a too-clear-eyed glance around the room Simon's men had dug deep into the mud of France.

That gay defiance was true no longer; eight weeks of hunger and cold, mortar barrages and fleas, sickness and stench, had begun the rot. Peter's first go Over the Top had completed his destruction. Untouched himself, Peter had — as Simon's letter of dutiful commendation had phrased it — "nobly and without thought of his own safety killed two of the enemy and carried Private Mellors back to the safety of our own lines."

Or, in plain English, Peter had ripped the throats out of two German soldiers no older than first-term schoolboys with his bayonet and dragged a screaming man across one hundred yards of shell-poxed dirt, leaving a trail of blood and flesh behind.

The C.O. had put Peter in for a medal. Private Mellors had died five

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minutes after being tumbled into their own trench. And all that was left of Peter was a pleasantly witty ghost.

Don't think, Simon reminded himself, and picked up another empty tin. His contribution to the Christmas cheer was to be a star to grace the makeshift Christmas tree. A silver star, bright and false as hope.

A star created of bully beef tins clumsily banged into hammered brightness with the butt of a Webley service revolver. When it was finished, he would wait until Christmas morning dawned, and then he would tie the star to the top of the half-dead holly tree.

And celebrate his fourth Christmas spent in the mud and ice of this trench near what was left of Cambrai, France.

The poppies blow

Another day over and done with. At first she had tried to keep count, but now she could no longer remember how long she had been here. Nearly a year, she thought, and thought that only because she had heard some of the older women whispering that it was Hanukkah again next week. She didn't know how they knew that. All she knew was that the days were now short and cold instead of long and hot. And that there was less food; less even than the little there had been before, when it was too hot.

Nearly a year, and that only because she was lucky. The fortunate one; the family's golden girl. She had been the fair twin, and Hannah the darker sister. And so Hannah had been sent to one line, and she to another. Because her hair was blonde. A *mitzvah,* some of the women here had told her. She was still alive; be happy.

"No! No, I want to go with my sister!" Her own voice screaming, and her arms clinging, and then her fingers, and Hannah being ripped away inch by inch, until she held only one of Hannah's bright red mittens in her desperate hands, and Hannah was gone....

Of all her family, only she was left, to endure. And wait until the day *she* didn't pass inspection; didn't meet whatever arbitrary standard held that inevitable day. Then she too would be gone, like Hannah, and Mama and Papa and her little brothers. David had been a big boy of six. But Saul had only just learned to walk. Only a baby.

Judith shifted on the narrow bunk and pried her only remaining

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treasure from its hiding place between the wooden slats. She mustn't think; she *wouldn't* think, or she would go mad. She would use her talisman; she would fly beyond this place of cold and filth and the stench of long-unwashed female bodies. She would use her star.

The metal star filled her hand with memories. Papa had brought the simple ornament home from his war, the Great One. "I found it when we took a trench from the enemy — that was not an easy thing, you know, to take a trench — so I claimed it as a souvenir."

She had always demanded to know what the star had been doing half-buried in bloody mud, what it was *for*. Papa had looked at her strangely, then. "It is what stars are always for, Judith. It is for hope." The star had waited in the velvet-lined box with Papa's medal for valiant service as a German infantryman. When the family had been told to pack — only one suitcase each, and be sure to label it neatly — Judith had remembered the medal, and the star. And when they had been told to leave their suitcases, she had hastily taken out both medal and star and tucked them securely into her coat pocket.

She no longer owned her father's medal for valorous service to the Fatherland. It had been silver; it had been confiscated by the first guard who had pawed her. But the star —

"Nothing but an old piece of tin." The guard had tried to toss away the star, but she had been unable to let it go. When he couldn't easily pull the star out of her rigid fingers, he had looked at her again, and then glanced around the crowded station platform, canny as a fox. "A kiss, and you can keep it."

Unable to lose the star when she had already lost so much, Judith had lifted her mouth, mute and frozen, and paid for the old tin star with a rapine kiss.

"You can't be a *real* Jew," the guard had said afterwards, staring covetously at the golden hair that had saved her for the iron mercy of a work camp. Such a little thing, to save a life. Had her hair been brown, like her sister's, she too would have climbed into a crowded boxcar, and been gone. Sent to one of the *konzentrationslager*....

Her hair did not shine so brightly now; the gold was tarnished with grease and filth. She could not remember when last she had been clean. "*But you LIVE, liebchen. Live.*" Her mother's voice echoed silent in her

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ears. Mama, who had grabbed Hannah away and held her fast in that other line, and called *"Go, Judith. Go — "*

Now Judith turned the little tin star over and over in her hands. The star flashed in the dimming light from the bare bulb far overhead. If she stared far enough into its silvery light, she could pretend she wasn't here. Pretend that someday this might be over, and she might even survive. But someday was as far away as tomorrow, or as near as all eternity.

She had learned to lock out reality, to focus only on the star's bright inner dream, to forget place and cold and fear and hunger. She had already forgotten the passage of time. It was not important.

Time held very little meaning in hell.

Between the crosses

PROPOSITION: A YEAR wasn't such a long time. Not really. Not when properly calculated. A year held only 8,760 hours, and he'd already survived 2,400 of them. Only 6,360 more hours, and then he could go home —

A shadow loomed over him. "Christmas speech at 1800 hours, boy. You come now, you hear?"

Jeff didn't look up; what was the point? "Sure." After a pause, he added. "Thanks." He no longer bothered to object to Roy Slattery's mode of address. Why make a federal case out of something that had ceased to matter? Like the rest of them, Roy was doing the best he could with what he had left.

Second Lieutenant Slattery had been a good ol' redneck boy once. That had been six months ago, when he'd been fresh meat right off the plane from L.A. A lifetime's endurance ago. Now something lived in Roy Slattery's pale eyes that it wasn't good to see. That it wasn't safe to see.

No one looked into anyone's eyes here. Like counting the days left until rotation out, it simply wasn't done.

It wasn't safe.

"Anything else?" Jeff asked, when Roy still stood over him, waiting.

"The party," Roy said. "We need ornaments for the Christmas tree."

"It's a palm tree, Lieutenant. I don't think you can decorate them."

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Jeff spoke as gently as possible to keep from either slugging Roy or bursting into tears. A Christmas tree, here in the mud and blood and insanity that was Firebase Alpha, Quang Lai, South Vietnam. How crazy could you get?

But they all knew the answer to that, so nobody asked the question. Just like nobody asked what they were doing here, trapped in a country where their alleged allies were petty tyrants to a man, and where all the average Vietnamese peasant wanted was to be left alone and get his rice crop in. And not get killed by either side for his own political good....

"The tree, boy." Roy's hominy-grits drawl, his Deep South prejudices, had been irritants once. Now Roy's drawl was flattened, his prejudices deadened by fear, the universal anesthetic. For this year out of time, all lesser fears and and dangers were subsumed in the simple need to survive another day, another hour. Even another minute mattered.

While we pretend we're normal. That this life is normal. That the United States Armed Forces weren't mired in the middle of the most unwinnable military disaster since the Peloponnesian Wars. That the American soldiers weren't really nothing but a pack of scared kids who couldn't believe they were really stuck here with the bugs and the mud and the adorable golden-skinned children with live grenades strapped to their scrawny chests.

According to the news clippings sent from home, they were winning the war. *Must* win, no matter how many twenty-year-old boys never saw or walked again. No matter how many trees or children burned —

Endless pretense, filtering down from the highest levels like poison silt. A random statistic slithered through Roy's mind: thirty-eight species of snake dwelt in the jungles of South Vietnam. Thirty-seven of them were venomous.

Roy stood before him, endlessly patient now. Waiting.

We wait, and pretend we're still alive.

"Yeah, I've got something," Jeff said at last, and shook his dog-tag chain. "How about this?"

The tin-can star chinked against his tags. It was old, and bore the dent-marks of long service. But it was still a silver star, and could certainly do emergency duty as a Christmas-tree ornament.

"Just a loan for the Christmas tree. I'll want it back." The star had been one of his dad's souvenirs from the ETO in the last big one. Dad had

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found it in one of the camps. When Jeff had been posted to Vietnam, Dad had given him the star — *"For luck, son. And for remembrance."*

"Thanks, boy. Bring it to the cook-tent at 1700." And Second Lieutenant Roy Slattery wandered off across the planks pretending to be dry pathways through the mud. Jeff didn't bother to watch him slog off through the ankle-deep mud.

Instead, he looked at the cheap metal star shining bright against the darkness of his hands. Too bright. Bright like Christmas lights, and Boston streets where snow fell white and icy cold. Where the lights of the bookstores cast shadows on the snow —

It wasn't good to think about home; it was a dangerous distraction. Perhaps it wasn't good to look into the time-battered surface of the star, either. For there he could look into his own eyes, and know that what waited in Roy's eyes waited in his as well —

Slowly, he spun the star and the blurred image of his face vanished. Thinking like that was stupid; thinking like that would get you killed. There was nothing waiting. Nothing but mud and sweat and blood, and one foot placed carefully in front of the other, step by step, until you at last reached peace.

6,359 hours to go —

A ragged edge of one of the star's points caught his thumb, left a thin red line tracing his skin. Fastidious, Jeff held the cut hand away from the star. The star was for tomorrow's Christmas tree; you didn't want blood marring a Christmas star.

Not even here.

It was bad luck.

Row on row

The crisis would be over any day now — they said so every hour on the newscasts. They said it real calm, and cool, and convincing. They'd been saying it that way for almost three weeks. Ever since the assassination.

The killing had happened someplace foreign. Someplace unimportant. Someplace she'd never even heard of before. Neither had anyone else she knew.

But now it was someplace vital. Someplace where violence simmered

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like a poison soup, ready to boil over the edges of the pot, spilling and burning —

Sojie shook her head to drive the image out, but the pictures in her mind refused to vanish. All those bright TV shows of troops heading off into nowhere, all of them young and motivated and waving at the newscameras. Reports of tactical strength, repeated over and over, like wishing would make it so. Like this wasn't anything. Just another drill.

So maybe it is. So what if they were fighting somewhere? They were always fighting somewhere, like they couldn't stop; like a string of real big family feuds. This was only another local disturbance. Nothing to worry about. They said so on the news every day.

Just remember to have a good supply of canned food on hand. And bottled water and basic first aid supplies. Please stay off the streets if possible. And stay tuned to your local station —

A dutiful citizen all her life, Sojie obediently stockpiled food and water and blankets, and kept the TV turned to CNN, and tried not to worry. Just like they told you, over and over, on all the newscasts.

But soundbites stalked her as she paced from room to room. *"Embargo...Advancing rebel troops...Possible cease-fire...U.N. mediators...President's message...Resolved to settle the conflict before...."*

Restless, she checked and rechecked her supplies of food, of clothing, of medicines. *Not that I'll need them. Course not. What do we have all those troops of ours on their way over there FOR, anyway?*

She frowned; hadn't they already *had* some troops over there? Before all this? She couldn't remember, and none of the news stories mentioned it.

She needed something to do; something cheerful. Something to take her mind off those newscasters and their smooth unreassuring voices. The kids were coming tomorrow, bringing their own kids to Grandma's for the holidays. So why didn't she haul down the box of holiday pretties and hang them in the windows now?

Decorating the house windows was a family tradition. Just like the old tin star Sojie lifted out of the box of holiday ornaments was a tradition. The metal star was old, and not all that pretty, really. But her own mother had found it a long time back. Way back, just before she'd been plucked

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safely from a place whose horrors Sojie couldn't even imagine and airlifted out with a hundred other orphans.

Her mother had never wanted to talk much about living in Vietnam. She was an American now, she'd said, and anyway, she didn't remember; she'd only been a very little girl.... But her mother had always kept the star she'd picked out of a pool of mud and bones so long ago. And each year her mother's lucky star held the place of honor during the holidays. "*To remind me how fortunate I am,*" her mother had said once, when Sojie's husband had asked why they hung such a battered thing up as a Christmas ornament.

Now the star dangled from Sojie's fingers, turned slowly on its twist of red ribbon, glowed dull silver in the TV's constant light. It was odd, but the star never looked really clean, somehow. And this year it seemed like darkness etched every crevice, and there were shadows on the metal.

But the star was traditional. And tradition was important, especially for the kids.

Sojie stood up and walked into the hall. She'd hang the old star in the living room window, just the way she always did. Because this year was no different than any other —

And now that she came to look, it was the old ribbon wound around the star that was the trouble. That was why the star seemed to look so ugly this year — that shabby ribbon, all worn and faded and hardly red at all any more.

"*The government asks that any Reservists who have not yet reported please —* "

Yeah. That was it. After the holidays, when the crisis was over, then she'd replace the red ribbon.

That mark our place....

Thirteen was the lucky number. You made thirteen patrols, you got recycled to Admin. That's what they told us, anyway. Thirteen, and out. I'd done four already —

But it was bad luck to count them. Just keep your mind focused on today and your sensors primed. Four, and today would tally five —

They said some had lived to walk all thirteen. I knew someone who knew someone who'd really done it.

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Today at least was quiet. Hard to be anything else, when there's nothing around but you and a lot of flat asphalt and a bunch of flaking ruins. Oh, yeah, and the enemy. Whoever it is this week.

We covered the ruins on the morning stomp. I don't know what they are, but you find them all over the place; Rissa, our platoon brain, says they're supposed to be some weird old stores or museums or something like that. Maybe they were, but they aren't much to look at now. Mostly rubble, and sometimes a lot of plastic flows and heaps of metal. Sometimes there's a standing wall. Mostly there isn't, which is better.

After the ruins, we got a break. Guess who got posted picket? And I didn't even volunteer, neither. I know better than that.

So I stood at the edge of what I guess was a wall a long time ago and kept my sensors turned up high. But that wasn't how I found it. I was just scuffing my foot in the dirt, ignoring the shadows burned into the wall I was walking. You learn never to look at the shadows.

It's bad luck.

My boot bumped something harder than dirt and I looked down and there it was, shining like a new-issue gun before you oiled it dark. I crouched down and dug it out of the dirt — yeah, *real* bright. The thing could've been an anti-personnel device or worse. But I was sick of seeing all that battered brown that seemed to go on forever all around us. And something seemed to whisper, how could dying quick be worse than this...?

It's too easy to get sort of sideways out here.

Anyway, the bright thing didn't blow, and came away from the dirt easy, sort of like it wanted me to pick it up. Like it wanted me — which just shows I'd been in the field a little too long and was maybe one private short of a platoon.

The thing wasn't much, to have taken that kind of damnfool risk to get. Turned out to be a battered star made out of some kind of silvery metal, the kind of star with five points. Dark stuff crusted in the cracks where metal'd been folded over. Maybe someone'd painted the thing once.

I brushed the dirt off the star. The wind picked up, and the dust blew past, and sunlight bounced off the metal star. The light made the burn-shadows dance on the ruined wall, like ghosts waiting to walk —

Never look at them.

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I guess it was a real old-fashioned holocam or something like that, because when I held the star up and the sun hit it again, I saw pictures.

A young white guy with dark hair and real weird clothes all covered with mud. A real thin pale girl with chopped-off hair. A tired-looking black guy carting a gun so old it didn't have even basic sensorpac. They all sort of faded in and out, one after the other.

— a guy lying in a ditch, scummy water dripping all over the place —

The pictures flashed by pretty fast, lots of them, and sort of shimmered, like the cam'd been off-focus when it shot.

— a woman wearing a ruby necklace and wet red skirt —

— gone by the time I realized the red line across her throat wasn't rubies, and her skirt didn't start out to be red —

The real funny thing was that all the people in the holo were holding the same damn star I'd just picked out of the dirt. Like maybe it was a family heirloom or something. The holo-people all looked like ghosts, but you could see the star shining just as bright as a little free-atmosphere nuke.

Weird.

I turned the thing over in my hand and looked at it again. Pretty. There wasn't much that was pretty anymore. And I'd found it while on lone patrol, so it was all mine. That was the rule.

I tucked the silver metal star into one of my belt carry-pocs. It felt good to have it there. Probably because it was good luck. Later I'd ask; Rissa would know if stars were supposed to be lucky.

But I was already sure the thing would bring me luck. They said luck warmed your bones, and that was how I could feel it, deep in mine. Like I owned all the time in the world.

And my star would make a nice service souvenir after I'd done my thirteenth patrol, or when the war ended. Whichever came first. Because the end for me might come even sooner than Lucky Thirteen.

After all, they say we'll be home by Christmas.

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Michael Thomas's last appearance in these pages was also his first—"Nightwatch" back in March 1997. He lives in Michigan and works as the managing editor of the Detroit Medical News *and the* Bulletin of the Michigan Psychiatric Society. *He says this new novelette was inspired by a paraphrased quotation from Thoreau: "What good is a telegraph line that stretches from New York to California if New York has nothing to say to California!"*

Sometimes a Helix Is a Circle

By Michael Thomas

IN THE HALLWAYS THEY whispered: fight after school, norms against mods, revenge for the destroyed solar cells in the Prestons' car.

No way, I thought, but at lunch my friends and I decided to hang around the playground after school just in case. As the day wore on, the classroom dulled, the odds on the fight being the only equation to catch my attention. Mr. Dalton, as always, caught me daydreaming.

"Eric?" Mr. Dalton said, "Have you ever considered using that brain your parents bought for you?"

Mr. Dalton taught the modified gene type advanced class. I have never met anyone who smiled as much as Mr. Dalton, the expression seemingly etched into his thin face, permanent wrinkles bunched around his cheeks from the effort. He prowled behind us, smiling, hands clasped behind his back, his head bobbing on his long neck like some bird of prey.

"The logarithm, Eric?"

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I stared at the probability model on my monitor, shrugged my shoulders and said, "How about two four time?"

He stared at me for a moment, finally got the joke. His smile stretched tighter across his teeth. Along the circle of terminals my mod classmates stared at me as if I was a somewhat amusing monkey.

The bell sounded, dismissing the advanced classes. I waited for an hour in the parking lot until the norms were dismissed. The late May sun sent heat ripples dancing on the asphalt and the air smelled of sap and newly mowed grass; three weeks until the end of eighth grade and the beginning of summer vacation, freedom in the air as thick as the smell of the grass.

Soon my norm friends came running and we raced to the best seats on the semi-circle of berms separating the softball diamonds from the neighboring subdivision. There was Lew, who at fifteen was two years older than us, but still in the eighth grade because he had been held back twice, and Screwy, which just about sums him up, and me, who they called Sleeves because I always wore long-sleeve shirts. Norms and mods never hung out together, but my friends and I were different despite the fact that I worked on trigonometry and the orbit of a gas giant circling Vega while they struggled with $x + 20 = 35$. They didn't seem to much care if I had been engineered to a 190+ IQ; I didn't care if Lew had been held back, or if Screwy had a row of five studs implanted along the side of his nose. Sometimes you can only care about another person if you don't care.

Screwy said, "You think the mods really messed up that car?"

Lew shrugged his shoulders and tipped back the brim of his Stetson. "One day there's a car and the next day something blows away every solar cell in the whole damn thing. Who else would be smart enough to do that? Right, Sleeves?" He glanced over Screwy's shoulder at me and grinned his lopsided grin, the one that turned his mouth into a lightning bolt.

I said, "Whoever did it should get a medal."

Screwy wrinkled his clay-colored face, stuck a finger in his ear and fished for ear wax. "All Bobby Preston did was spray paint some wall."

"Not just graffiti," I said. "He and his pals painted swastikas all over the university genetic research building. If you let that kind of hate crap go unchallenged it'll get worse. There's already a move in congress to outlaw genetic modifications. Most norms would support it, wouldn't

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blink if they put us in concentration camps. Pretty soon the real brown shirts will be goose-stepping down the streets."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Screwy said.

"It's called politics. It's not my fault if I can read."

Screwy said, "Yeah, that's why we hate mods."

I shoved a handful of grass down the back of his T-shirt and he took a swipe at me with his backpack and was about to leap when Lew tackled him and called him a pin dick.

"Your mother," Screwy said as he squirmed away from Lew.

"Least my mother's not a guy in drag," Lew laughed.

We killed time that way, clowning beneath the fiery circle of the sun until we heard voices coming from behind the back stop. A gang of norms marched onto the pitcher's mound led by Bobby Preston. Bobby had once tried to play a prank on the principal by ordering ten pizzas and having them delivered to the principal's house; unfortunately he gave the pizzeria his own phone number. People like Bobby give norms a bad name.

For about ten minutes the norms milled around the pitcher's mound until a group of my mod classmates left the school. Even at a distance I recognized most of them: Liz was there, whose nylons swished when she crossed her legs, and Justin Moore, engineered for flawless skin as well as brains, and others from the far end of the bell-shaped curve.

They walked toward the subdivision and as I recognized more faces, my gut went rigid. On the diamond, backpacks hit the dirt, baseball bats fanned the air. "This isn't a fight. They're going to attack them."

"How do you know?" Screwy said.

"That's the Greek club. No one over there could defend themselves against a flea."

Sure enough the cat calls and the jeers from the norms rang out and the mob started toward my classmates, Bobby Preston in the lead with a Louisville Slugger in his hands and moronic hate etched into his blubbery face. The mods tried to ignore them, but the norms had a good angle and cut them off before they could reach the subdivision.

"You know," Lew said, "I hate Bobby Preston. Maybe I'll go make him give me back the five dollars he owes me." With that, Lew cocked his Stetson and sauntered toward the norms like the hero of a western. That was Lew; not stupid by any means, just living out his personal rebellion

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fantasy, using failure as a weapon. His father was a drunk, no one knew where his mother lived. My own father walked out on us when I was five. I haven't seen him since. I can't remember what he looked like.

"Hey pin dick," Lew yelled.

The crowd of norms parted for him.

"This ain't your fight," Bobby Preston said and backed away.

The norms closed in around Lew.

"You owe me five bucks," Lew said. "Pay up or get off my playground."

"This ain't your...."

"Want to prove me wrong?"

"They messed up my dad's car!"

"Prove it."

More bodies crowded Lew.

Screwy and I stared at each other and I knew we both felt the same disgrace at our cowardice. We charged down the hill toward our friend who was about to stand up to fifteen angry norms.

When we got there, Lew had already shoved Bobby Preston to the ground. The mods stood nervously by. Tension charged the hot air like heat lightning.

"Take a hike." Lew laughed.

A big kid leapt from the crowd and pinned Lew's arms behind his back. Bobby Preston scrambled to his feet, his arms swinging backward, the Louisville Slugger tracing an arc through the air, the upswing of which would have caught Lew in the side of the head.

I'm not sure what happened next. People told me about it, but I don't remember. It was like when you're in an accident, one moment you're driving along and the next moment your car is a mangled heap only your brain has mercifully blocked out the actual crash.

Bobby Preston lay on the ground screaming, holding his face. The kid still held Lew, both of them too stunned to move. Everyone froze.

And I wasn't where I thought I was.

Screwy and I had been ten feet away when Bobby swung the bat, separated from them by the mob of norms. Now I stood between Bobby and Lew. Pain throbbed through my right hand. Everyone stared at me.

"Jesus," Lew said.

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The norm released him and jumped back.

"Sleeves, how the hell did you do that?"

"Do what?" I said. Fear scurried up my chest. Bobby staggered to his feet and for a moment dropped his hands from his face. A crimson splotch discolored the side of his face like a massive sunburn in the shape of a hand print. For a moment he stared wild-eyed at me, then turned and bolted, the other norms fleeing with him.

"I didn't do anything," I protested.

Lew studied me, the mods in a semi-circle watching me as if I was a science experiment. I caught a glimpse of Bobby Preston, intercepted halfway across the playground by Mr. Dalton, who had left after tutoring the Greek Club.

"I've never seen you move that fast," Lew said. "I've never seen anyone move that fast. And you stuck your hand in Preston's face and — what did you do to him?"

I looked down; my palm and my fingertips were red, a mirror image of the burn on Bobby Preston's face. Something was very wrong.

"I didn't do anything," I said again, lamely.

"The hell you didn't," Lew said. "You saved my life." Lew extended his hand, but as I reached out to shake it he suddenly yanked his hand back. I had never seen Lew frightened before. Behind him the mods still watched me, then looked beyond me.

I turned to face smiling Mr. Dalton, his hands behind his back, head bobbing on his pipe cleaner neck. He studied me, peered at my hand, let his smile become a grin. "We need to talk, Eric. Perhaps tomorrow after school. I may be able to help you."

His jaw trembled from the effort of holding his smile.

THAT NIGHT I SAT at the dinner table, numb, mindlessly rolling olives through the spaghetti sauce. Twice the phone rang and twice I flinched, knowing it signaled my arrest for disfiguring Bobby Preston. The first call was a survey on laundry detergent, the second a wrong number for someone named Dawn Anne. The world went on. Didn't they know I was in anguish? Didn't they know something monstrous had happened today? The phone rang; my heart beat a rhythm like firecrackers. I

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answered the phone and again it was the guy trying to find Dawn Anne.

Apparently the world did not care about my anguish.

I shrugged my shoulders and went to my room. At one point I actually thought of confessing to my mother. She, however, was working late at the board meeting of Franklyn National Life and Casualty. My stepfather Darryl was somewhere, probably cheating on my mother, or perhaps getting another treatment for his acne scars.

I did not sleep that night; every time I closed my eyes I saw Bobby Preston's burned face, felt bile rise in my throat. I had no idea what I had done, or how I could control it. There wasn't even a name I could use to impale it and neutralize it like a butterfly pinned to a specimen board. At times the whole scene on the playground seemed like some terrible television show, an actor burning another actor's face through the latest computerized special effects. Only it wasn't television. I might do it again and really hurt someone this time. So I did not sleep.

In the morning I met Lew and Screwy in the parking lot and we sat near the day lilies and pitched gravel at the NORTH POINTE MIDDLE SCHOOL — HOME OF THE PATRIOTS sign. When he wasn't eyeing the seventh grade girls, Lew glanced at me, looking like he wanted to ask about the day before, but saying nothing.

Screwy, however, had no hesitation. "Jesus, Sleeves," he blurted out, "that was great. How did you do it? The look on Preston's face! How'd you do it?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Do it again. There's that Milton kid. Go and...."

Lew cuffed him on the ear.

"Hey!"

"Shut up."

"That hurt!"

"Now you can't hear the answer so don't ask the question."

Screwy looked to me for sympathy; I flicked a pebble at him.

Lew said, "Look out. Here it comes."

Bobby Preston and his friends wandered across the parking lot, stopped ten feet away from us and glared. There were times when I actually felt sorry for Bobby Preston; the youngest of four brothers, each meaner than the next, with a father who never hesitated slapping his son

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and calling him stupid in front of the whole world, Bobby had no choice but to develop the personality of a slow-witted pit bull.

"That's a nasty sunburn you got there, Bobby," Lew said.

The rest of Bobby's face turned the color of the hand print.

"You're dead meat," he said, staring at me.

I wanted a smart-ass comeback, but all I could manage was, "Oh yeah?" Fear numbed my mind, fear not of Bobby Preston but of myself.

Apparently, smart-ass comebacks were also beyond Bobby. He stuttered, turned the color of a tomato, then marched off, his goons in tow.

Now at this point, Screwy gave us a demonstration of how he earned his nickname. Rather than leave well enough alone, he pranced after Bobby Preston, doing a monkey imitation, chattering, "Hey Preston, want some suntan lotion?"

It took about ten seconds for Bobby to whirl and charge after him. Screwy turned to flee back to us, found his escape route blocked by Bobby's pals, then ran for his life across the parking lot, the gang in pursuit.

Lew and I watched him disappear behind the school buses, Lew shaking his head and saying, "What an idiot."

"Yeah, but he's our idiot."

For a few minutes we sat silently, then Lew asked, "Sleeves, what the hell did happen yesterday?"

"I don't know," I said. "I've heard of unexpected things happening to people who have been modified. It's like they switch on genes for intelligence and somehow accidentally switch on something else. I remember reading about this kid who was modified for super math abilities. He was fine until he turned twelve and then something went wrong. His brain stopped sending signals to his body. The kid's a vegetable now." I pitched a chunk of asphalt at the sign. "I'm scared," I said.

Lew studied his shoes. "Yeah. It's kind of like my old man. You never know when he's gonna go berserk and take a tire iron to your head."

Right, except Lew could run from his crazy father; my crazy guy was inside my head.

The bell rang and we headed for our lockers. Both norms and mods started school at eight, but mods finished in five hours, while norms stayed for six, the idea being that mods needed the extra time for all the wonderful advanced stuff they would certainly do. Which some kids did

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while many of us went home and watched television. The difference was just another source of friction between mods and norms.

The morning passed as always, only this time all the other mods in the advanced class were aware of me. They snuck glances at me. They asked me to sit at their table at lunch. Unthinkingly, I did and only later realized Lew and Screwy were by themselves, watching me.

Even we genetically engineered superstars are pack creatures at heart; the most popular mods and thus the alpha male and female of the pack were Liz and Justin Moore. As we left the cafeteria, Justin said, "I'm having a pool party on Saturday. I'd like you to come."

"Ah, sure," I said, then hesitated. Lew and Screwy and I had planned to go to the movies on Saturday night. "No, I don't think so. I've got plans."

"Hanging out with the retards?" Liz asked.

"My friends are my business."

"Someday you'll realize you're one of us," Justin said. "Those losers you hang around with just pull you down. Maybe it's about time you live up to your potential."

I had heard this lecture before from my mother. She thought Lew and Screwy were a disease, infecting me with terminal normality.

Liz stepped in front of me and pulled a centaur-shaped pendant from around her neck. "Do you know what this is?" she asked. "It's a signaling device. Press on it here and it sounds an alarm and your location across the Net to every terminal at every mod's house. We made it ourselves."

"Nice," I said. "But you didn't have to go to all the trouble. You can buy that kind of stuff at the mall."

"You don't understand," she said. "We have to learn how to make this kind of device by ourselves because one day the norms will come after us. Norms hate us. They hate you, Eric. We need to stick together. We need people like you with your kind of talents."

Somehow, the word "talent" seemed out of place. I felt more like a gargoyle.

"I like my friends," I said.

"But you need us," Justin said.

The afternoon went on and soon the bell rang. As I stood to leave, I realized the whole class had remained in their seats and now stared at me. Mr. Dalton circled my desk and smiled.

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"That must have been a very frightening experience for you yesterday," he said.

"I'm all right."

"Unfortunately the rumor is spreading around the school. It would be very bad if news of this incident reached the news media."

"I didn't mean it," I said.

"Of course not," Mr. Dalton said. "But that won't matter. Can you see the headlines now? Mod boy attacks normal child. Freak disfigures child. The media will have fun with that. And just think of our political leaders. Not to mention the police." His smile stretched tight across his teeth.

I studied my shoes.

"You know, Eric, your classmates are very worried about you. You've always held yourself aloof. You've never joined in. I think you might want to change all of that. The day is coming when you will need each other."

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Do you know how you did what you did?"

I shook my head.

"It's not surprising. Very often new talents have a way of sneaking up on a person. It must be frightening."

Liz said, "There's nothing to be scared of with us."

Justin said, "We can help you."

"I'd like you to confide in me," Mr. Dalton said. "Get over your fright. Look at things clearly."

Since the fight on the playground I had been a nervous wreck, but suddenly all of this attention from people who had never before indicated that they knew I existed got on my nerves. The anxiety eased and my old smart-ass personality came back. "It's not that frightening. It might come in handy when talking to teachers."

Mr. Dalton went on smiling, head bobbing above his quivering adam's apple. "You know, Eric, your classmates have been very tolerant of you. With no provocation you've rejected them, slighted them, some might say you even betrayed them. Instead of mixing with your own kind you insist on consorting with your intellectual inferiors."

"Fuck off," I said.

"Good vocabulary, Eric. Your classmates, on the other hand, are

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reading Plato in the original Greek. I could teach you something more than gutter talk."

"What's Greek for fuck off?"

"Very cute, Eric. You can bait me all you want, but it won't work. We need to talk."

"I need to go watch television."

Liz said, "You've been in the same class with us for eight years and you have no idea what the rest of us are doing. You've never been part of us. Why?"

"Maybe," Justin said, "because it makes him feel superior being smarter than his imbecilic friends. If he was part of our group he'd have to compete on an equal footing with his intellectual equals."

I turned on him and snapped, "Keep it up and I'll knock your perfect teeth out."

"All right," Mr. Dalton yelled. "Cut it out. Now listen to me, Eric. You have a gift. You do not have the luxury of adolescent rebellion. Sit down."

I glared at him, then finally sat, my fists clenched, a rock sitting in the pit of my stomach.

"Do you remember Corey Binkman?" Mr. Dalton said.

A vague image of red hair and acne appeared in my mind.

"Not long ago, he discovered he can bend metal without touching it. Once upon a time that was a sideshow attraction. Now, without quite understanding how, we've engineered that ability into a child. Corey is no longer here because I arranged to have him sent to the Advanced Genetic Investigations Institute at Harvard where they will study his gifts. He's quite happy there. He's with other children who have developed unusual talents. When he's old enough, he'll be assured of a scholarship to Harvard. All of the children there have been referred by teachers like myself who specialize in modified children. We form a close knit group and keep our eye out for promising children. Children like yourself. Tomorrow, representatives from the Institute will talk to your parents. They will want you to go with them so that they can study you and...."

"No way," I blurted out.

Mr. Dalton smiled, the expression drawing his skin tight, outlining his cheekbones. "Eric, what you don't understand is that your classmates

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and I are truly concerned about you. The plain fact of the matter is that all of the ramifications of the genetic manipulation you underwent prenatally are not fully understood. There are long sequences of genetic code in all of us that are apparently useless. At one time perhaps they served a purpose that later was deselected by evolution, or perhaps they were accidents that never should have occurred. These redundant nucleotide sequences are still a mystery. However, in some children like yourself, sequences have been accidentally triggered. Unless we can understand what's going on inside of you, we can't control it. You can't control it. Think, Eric, it's not simply what happened yesterday on that playground. Other changes may have occurred. Do you want to gamble on your own well-being? Think of the stories I've told you about the tragedies, the talented children who suddenly...."

"I know the stories," I snapped.

"Then pay attention to them. We can't control this ability of yours, but if we study it, perhaps we can bring it under conscious volition for you and your classmates."

"They don't have the same abilities?"

"Not so far. Some may not have the same modifications. Some may have these abilities, but so far the talents are latent. And it is very important that we find out how to control these talents."

Justin said, "Yesterday was just a sample of what the norms can do."

Liz said, "It will get worse. We need to protect ourselves. You can help us."

Mr. Dalton said, "I've dedicated my life to working with children of extraordinary talent. If there were no such thing as genetic modification, talented people would still be picked on. It's always that way. The average always resent the superior and let their envy turn to hate. Only now it's worse. There's a reason, not just blind chance. Talent can be bought, superior intelligence can be manufactured if you have enough money. The ancient conflict between the haves and the have-nots will become genocidal because there is no way the average can win now. You and your kind will soon control the wealth and perhaps even the governments of the world because you are better than the rest. It's unfair, but that's the way it is. Sooner or later the average will turn on you to prevent that. So you must protect yourselves. You must take your rightful place and lead the world."

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By then, I had shut down, gone numb, heard the words, but understood nothing. I thought he was crazy, thought my mod classmates were creeps and yet something about his words intoxicated me like some drug- or alcohol-induced fantasy that makes luminous sense for a moment, then vanishes the moment you try to think clearly about it. Mostly, I wanted to run.

"I have to go now," I said.

Mr. Dalton smiled. "You have time to think about it. Go have fun at Justin's pool party. Get to know your own kind."

"I don't swim," I said.

"I can teach you," Liz said.

"I didn't say I couldn't swim. I said I don't swim."

"Eric, that's not really the point," Mr. Dalton said.

"Can I go now?"

He smiled again. "You're not a prisoner."

So I left, fled the room and the staring faces, waited for Lew and Screwy to be dismissed at our usual meeting place in the parking lot. They never came. I took off for the new housing development where we often killed time and found my two friends sitting on a knoll. I joined them and for a moment we were silent, watching a robotic grader creep across the scarred landscape like an arthritic spider.

"How's your new friends?" Screwy said.

Lew elbowed him in the ribs.

"Hey!"

"Shut up."

"They aren't my friends," I said.

"That's your business," Lew said and lit a cigarette. He passed it to both of us. I took a drag even though the smell sent my head reeling.

"I heard Bobby Preston say they're going to get you," Screwy said. "They say you threw something in Bobby's face that burned him."

I shrugged my shoulders. "He can do anything he wants."

Lew craned his neck to peer around Screwy's shoulders. "Just be careful. They're stupid, but they're smart enough to be dangerous."

"I'm not scared," I said.

"We still going to the movies Saturday night?" Screwy asked.

"For sure," I said.

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"Can you show me how to do that thing with your hand? That was awesome!"

"Shut up," Lew said.

"I don't know how I did it," I said.

"God, if I had enough money I'd have them change me like that."

Lew said, "It'd take all the money in the world just to make you read without moving your lips."

"Least I was never held back."

"That's because no one could ever stand having you in their class twice."

"Your mother sucks."

"Eat me."

"There's nothing much to eat."

"Jerk."

I was beginning to feel much better; I was back among friends.

THE NEXT EVENING, men in suits came after dinner and explained the Harvard program to my mother. Darryl was out someplace.

My mother nodded her head a lot, looked in awe as if the man was singing a psalm.

The man who did most of the talking folded his hands on the stomach that bulged over his belt and said, "And you have to consider that Eric would in effect be receiving an education all the time he was at the Institute. Depending upon the results of our study he might be automatically accepted at Harvard, tuition free."

"Oh, this is so exciting," my mother said.

"Screw it," I said.

My mother tittered, but eyed me with her "you'll pay for that later" look. "Kids," she said and shrugged her shoulders.

"Indeed," the man said. "Considering that incident the other day I'm sure Eric is still a bit confused."

I cringed.

"What incident?" my mother asked.

"Just fooling around," I said.

The man in the suit cocked his head, squished the fat rolls at his neck.

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"I'd hardly call it fooling around. He somehow generated enough heat through his hand to cause second degree burns."

"What?" my mother whispered.

"I'm sorry. I thought you knew." He explained the fight in the playground to my mother. She stared at me as if I had just stepped off a flying saucer.

"You did that?" she asked.

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Fortunately we were able to arrange matters with the local police," the man said.

"The police?" I said and felt as if a giant had squeezed the air from my lungs.

"Well, Eric," the man said. "You assaulted a boy and burned his face. Naturally his parents informed the authorities." To my mother he said, "So you see, it would be in everybody's best interests if Eric went to the Institute."

When he was gone, my mother said, "This is one incredible break."

"I'm not going," I said.

"If I say you are, then you're going. I paid a lot of money to give you those advantages. You're not going to waste them and make me look like a fool."

And that about summed up her point of view. I waited for her to ask me about the fight. She said nothing.

The next day I sat with Lew and Screwy at lunch and Screwy told me about the latest rumor.

"Bobby Preston says he's gonna get your ass, man. He says his brother Billy's gonna get his high-school friends and then they're gonna beat the shit out of you."

Lew gurgled Hawaiian Punch through the straw in his juice box. "Looks like I'll have to have a talk with that boy."

"Forget it," I said. "I'm not afraid."

"Didn't say you were. I just don't like him."

Justin and Liz came to the table and stood over me. "Mr. Dalton wants you to stay after school today. There's something important you should know about."

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Screwy stuck a straw up his nose, then pulled it out and licked the tip.

Liz and Justin ignored him. "It's important," Justin said.

"Yeah, whatever," I said.

I did stay that afternoon along with Justin and Liz while the rest of the advanced class went home. Mr. Dalton grinned and waved me over to his terminal and dialed into the Net. "This one," he said.

The message from someone named Archimedes read, "Anyone hear about what happened in California? some gene freek burned a normal kid with some kind of wird new power!"

After that Mr. Dalton navigated through groups and boards and chat lines all humming with rumors and stories and vindictive debates, all circling back to the story of a mod kid who burned a normal.

"I got where I got because I'm smart daddy didn't buy me a brain. If they're going to start something then i say kill the bastards."

"Nucleotide manipulation is not a hanging offense, last time I heard."

"Screw you."

"Anytime anyplace."

"There's a lot of reports coming out in the literature about unsuspected effects of the engineering. peptide transmutations seem very common. maybe we should shut up a minute and actually study some of these things."

And so on until we arrived at another ominous note from Archimedes. "Apparently it really happened. My friend says it was at the North Pointe Middle School."

My head swam, arms tingled.

Mr. Dalton swiveled in his chair. "It was only a matter of time. It will probably reach the network news by tonight, tomorrow at the latest."

"You're in danger," Justin said.

"You're putting us all in danger," Liz said.

"Can I go now?" I said.

"Of course," Mr. Dalton said. "Just remember that if anything happens the best place for you to be is at the Harvard Institute."

I walked slowly from the room, but inside I fled, bolted and ran from the stupidity scrolling across the terminal. The sun warmed the spring day; people went about their business; I wanted desperately to be them, anyone but a little kid with doom following him like a cloud of gnats. But

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I was not normal and average and it seemed only a matter of time before the normal folks turned on me.

I waited in the parking lot for Lew and Screwy; I was too nervous to sit still so I compulsively paced circles around a stop sign. Finally the norms were released and we walked toward our subdivision.

When we reached my house, Lew stopped and I realized he wasn't next to me. I turned, saw him gaping, staring upwards, followed his gaze and then whispered, "Shit."

The windows in my house, the living room and dining room on the first floor and the bedrooms on the second were all shattered, empty frames like the empty sockets of a skull.

"Shit," I said again. The sight was unreal; I wondered if it was the wrong house, wanted it to be someone else's house. But it was mine.

Screwy danced around, muttering and pointing at the door. Yellow spray-painted letters read, "Death to Mods" and the graffiti was punctuated by a swastika.

"I'm going to kill that Preston," Lew growled.

Anger surged from my belly to force my hands into fists. As I stared at the vandalized house and the circular holes the rocks had made in the windows, I saw with terrible clarity that there would always be Bobby Prestons, always had been, people who could do anything they wanted to you whenever they liked. The unfairness of it all sickened me, angered me, forced a scream to my lips. But I was silent.

That night, after the police left, after Darryl nailed sheets over the windows and my mother had swept up the broken glass, I went to my room and locked the door and tried to summon the force, the whatever the thing was inside of me. Since the day on the playground I had tried to forget it, lived in a kind of half-realized fear that it might overtake me at any moment. Now I welcomed it. I tried to concentrate, but mostly my mind wandered. I tried leaping and spinning, but I only stumbled about the room and stubbed my toe. I tried karate moves, but only ran out of breath. I tried focusing my mind, but summoned only chaos. At last I gave up.

And then the call came, Screwy on the other end, breathless, incoherent at first, finally spitting out the news. Lew had gone after Bobby Preston, only this time Preston's friends had got him and held him down while Bobby shattered Lew's shoulder with his Louisville Slugger.

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"We gotta do something," Screwy wailed. "This sucks!"

"Yeah," I said. "I'll do something."

The rage exploded in me like a nova.

Of course we went to the emergency room, because who knew where Lew's father might be. We waited in hard plastic chairs until he finally emerged from the treatment rooms. Even at a distance I knew it was bad. His face was the color of a mushroom. He walked straight and yet seemed to list to the side of his damaged shoulder. I had the feeling that his shoulder would probably never heal right, like those football players who can no longer lift their arms higher than their shoulders.

We met him and walked him into the cool night air, silent, just being there. I carried his Stetson for him. Eventually he said, "Next time it's his ass," only he didn't say the words as Lew would have said them, but in the hollow voice of someone who knew they had failed yet again, a voice like the crackle of dry leaves.

"Sure you will," I said. The anger inside of me was like white hot metal.

I PASSED BOBBY PRESTON in the hall the next day. The hand print on his face was almost gone, replaced by flaking skin, the burn being no worse than a second degree sunburn. He refused to meet my eyes even though I knew he saw me. I fought back the urge to smash his head against the lockers.

At lunch I sat alone until Justin and Liz sat down opposite me. "We heard about your house," Justin said.

Liz said, "It's just the beginning you know. It'll get worse."

"Mr. Dalton was telling us about the elections next fall," Justin said. "He says already the candidates are making us an issue. We'll be in danger."

"Then I guess we ought to do something about it," I said.

They both blinked at me with their perfectly formed eyes. I told them about Lew.

"See what we mean?" Justin said.

"So maybe if we put our advanced brains together we could think up a way to stop them."

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They glanced at each other, suddenly looking nervous. "What do you mean?" Liz said.

"If I come to your party, then everyone will think we're there. If we were to sneak out for a while and then come back, we'd have an alibi."

"And do what?" Justin asked.

"Make sure Bobby Preston never hurts anyone again," I said. I was so cold I shivered, hugged myself to stop any visible trembling. Inside the rage had turned cold and reptilian.

"You mean kill him?" Liz gasped.

I yearned to say yes, but even at my most bitter I could not say it. "You guys did his old man's car, didn't you?"

Justin turned the color of the hand print on Bobby Preston's face, finally nodded his head.

"Then this time we go after his house. Just a friendly warning."

"But...."

"That's the deal," I said. "I join you, I go to the Institute and in return we fry his house. Agreed?"

They studied each other, more awkward than I had ever seen them, then both nodded their heads.

"Deal," I said. And the cold was gone and I felt a rush of loneliness, a desperate urge to belong. I was one of them.

By Saturday, a fit of nerves almost sent me to the movies with Lew and Screwy, but instead I rolled a bathing suit in a towel and headed for the party.

Justin lived in a mammoth colonial at the end of the subdivision with pillars before the main entrance, a pool in the back yard and a sauna in a greenhouse. It was strange to see all of my classmates there in bathing suits, somersaulting off the diving board, behaving just like normal kids. I tried not to stare at Liz, but when I saw her on the diving board, her tall and slender body encased in a swim suit, I found it hard to breathe.

Justin slapped me on the back. "You can change in the house."

Which I did, feeling skinny and foolish, emerging from the house and holding my breath.

All of the kids whom I had spent most of my life avoiding greeted me as if I had always been their friend. I sat with a circle of kids by the pool and drank Coke and found out who was going steady with whom and

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which couples were breaking up. Six-foot speakers blared the sounds of electric guitars and drums played as if they were weapons. A cooler of beer was opened. A joint was passed. Above us Ursa Major began its revolution through the night sky. Everything was normal.

Justin crooked a finger at me. I followed him behind the greenhouse where Liz was waiting. A small robotic spider, the kind electricians used to thread wire through walls, sat on an overturned garbage can. Justin grinned and held the metal insect beneath my nose as if he expected me to sniff the thing. "It's been modified," he said. "We can send it through the air conditioning, or anyplace there's an opening. Once inside it'll sniff out the breaker box, clamp onto a line and send a surge through the wiring. Something's bound to short circuit and then poof — the house goes up like kindling."

"Won't they find it — afterwards I mean. Can't they trace it?"

"Nope. There's a vial of acid set to detonate one hour after we trip the switch. It'll look just like part of the wreckage. Neat, aye?"

"Neat," I said.

He slapped me on the back and Liz smiled and took my arm and we rejoined the party. I gulped a beer to douse the anxiety singeing my nerves; anticipation threatened to lift me from my chair and send me into the night like some demented arsonist.

The latch on the gate clanked and I looked up to see Mr. Dalton walking toward me, smiling.

"Hello, Eric," he said and sat next to me on a lawn chair.

"Don't look so shocked," Justin said and laughed. "He always comes. He's not like a teacher at all."

"I'm your friend," Mr. Dalton said and smiled exposing his teeth.

"He buys the beer," Justin said.

Mr. Dalton smiled; his eyes watched me, cold and bird-like, his head bobbed on his scrawny neck. "I can't tell you how happy I am that you decided to accept the Institute. Next week we'll talk about the details of your actual departure. Nice party."

"Yeah," I said. I wanted him miles away; if he saw us sneak away he might figure out we were the ones who torched the Preston house.

"I have many friends at the Institute," he said. "They'll see to it that you're well treated. It never hurts to have friends in high places."

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Justin, beginning to sway from the beer and the joint, laughed a high-pitched hyena sound. "High places. Yeah, that's it, high, high, high. High enough to get us the circuit diagrams."

I flinched. "What circuit diagrams?"

"The circuits, dunce." With an exaggerated wink, he stumbled to a group of mods at poolside.

A body hit the pool, spraying us, broke the surface, laughing. "I love you kids," Mr. Dalton said and patted my arm.

I pulled my arm away from him. Dalton knew, was in on the plan. He had even given us the device we were about to use to destroy a person's house. His corruption was like something tangible hanging over the back yard.

Suddenly the party wasn't fun. The smell of chlorine gagged me. The music was like an assault.

No one else was bothered. Liz stood with a cocked hip and ran a hand through her thick hair while she talked to a group of boys. Justin laughed. More bodies hit the pool. The music blared.

I went to the cooler and helped myself to a beer. Already empties filled a bushel basket.

I tried to ignore Mr. Dalton, but he appeared next to me as I stood by the pool. "I'm glad you kids can have fun now," he said. "Before you know it you'll be grown and you'll be running everything. It's inevitable, you know." He smiled and patted my shoulder. "You're the next step in evolution. You're as far above humans as humans are above apes. You'll bring down the stupidity of human beings and out of the rubble create a new Athens."

"And of course we'll remember our friends who protected us," I said. I had no idea why I said it, the words simply materializing as if someone else had said them.

And it happens again. Only this time I am wide awake and conscious of every detail.

All of the chaotic movement around me slows while my brain functions at normal speed. Hours pass between the time a boy leaps from the diving board and his body hits the water.

I watch. His approach is a straight line. I know the angle of his descent. I see precisely the spot he will hit. He will hit the water flat. He does. The

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whack of his body on the water is a thunderclap. For ages he remains beneath the water. At last he breaks the surface, bubbles scatter along the water like storm clouds in some cyclonic vortex. The boy grimaces, holds his stomach. I watch each fold in his face reverberate off the next, driving the expression into his forehead, tectonic plates of skin carving a mountain range of a frown.

A girl tiptoes across the tiles. She heads for the diving board, but her gait lists to the left. She will turn from the diving board and instead go to the beer cooler. As if I had been watching her all night, I calculate that she will not return to the pool. Beyond my line of sight, a boy is coming to her, a boy I have known all night will couple with her without my ever once thinking that thought, irresistibly drawn to her, propelled by the surging of his blood.

The boy enters my line of sight, traveling a path I glimpse from the corner of my eye, joins the girl. They linger at the cooler. They walk arm in arm toward the house, in step, bodies flowing with each other in a soundless swaying tango.

It's as if all the myriad details of life that I normally filter out of conscious perception now come to me in slow motion, giving me time to analyze them all, see the patterns, connect the dots. I know I have done this all along, only subconsciously, and now the process has become conscious, the boundary between the two vanishing, night entwined with day.

I watch the boy across the circle from me. I have paid no attention to him all night, but I somehow know he has drunk four beers and finished the joint. I know he will stand and lose his balance because his foot is deformed. I have known him for ten years and never noticed his limp, but all the same I know he walks with a slight limp. I have known it all along, but never consciously thought it.

The boy stands, loses his balance as he places his weight on his deformed foot, falls back into his chair, laughs, again stands. Behind the chair I see four empty beer cans.

I turn and watch Justin push his way in slow motion through the group of boys circling Liz and put his arm around her and toss his beer can away. I watch the can arc through the air and descend and bounce in slow motion against the pool tiles. Without looking I know a glass has been set

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on the ground. I do not remember seeing it, or seeing someone put it down, but somewhere beneath the level of consciousness I must have registered the fact without ever once being aware of it. I know the can's trajectory will knock it against the glass. I hear the clink, turn and watch the glass topple over, shatter, chips of glass spinning across the tiles like gas clouds spewing from a supernova.

As I watch the glass I know I am calculating something, not knowing what, then suddenly thinking it.

Bobby Preston did not trash my house. The norms left school an hour after us. But my classmates had the time while I was detained by Mr. Dalton.

I look at Mr. Dalton. Our eyes meet. He smiles. I notice that his smile is made by his mouth alone and that the rest of his face takes no part in the expression. Above the smile his predatory bird eyes watch me, intense, malevolent.

He is not our friend. He is not our teacher. He has set the Net buzzing about me. The name Archimedes I saw on the Net makes sense now. He has used the Net and my classmates against me to scare me into accepting the Institute. Perhaps he really believes we will rule the world one day. Perhaps he feels important being associated with us, the way empty people always gain substance from the shadows of the mighty.

I do not care about his motives.

He has betrayed me. He has caused my friend to feel pain.

"You son of a bitch," I say.

Mr. Dalton's smile falters.

"You're just as sick as Bobby Preston."

"Eric, I...."

Mr. Dalton screams. His face so close to mine contorts like a death's head. The air fills with the stench of burning flesh. He twists away from me. I am heat. I am the fire of a sun.

Mr. Dalton stumbles away from me, stares wildly at the charred flesh of his arm, then drops to his knees and shoves his burnt arm into the pool.

The mods back away from me, shocked, scared.

For a moment I yearn to go after them all.

Instead, I run. I run from the house, run in a circle, endlessly pass the same houses, the same streets, the same trees, or perhaps I stand still

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while the neighborhood revolves around me, endlessly orbits the fiery violence of a star that in reality is a scared shivering boy. Everywhere I go I think of circles and slowly I come to realize the circles are some communication from my brain and my cells in their manic hyperdrive and then I know the meaning of the circles and I collapse for a moment on a lawn and stare at the fabric of diamonds spread across the sky.

We are all trapped in our circles, norms and mods and Lew and Liz and me, mindlessly returning again and again to repeat the old patterns of our genes and our lives. I have been hurt by parents who could not love and so I have learned to hurt and in turn hurt Bobby Preston and smiling Mr. Dalton. Something deep within the root cellar of my soul has become manifest in the power to burn.

And beneath the learning, hardwired into our genes, is the never-ending circle of our pack with all its fear and hatred of the outsider, sitting within us like some squat and venomous toad.

I want out of my circle.

My mind slows down to catch up with the world, or perhaps the world speeds up. Eventually I stood and walked across the subdivision to Lew's house and sat on his porch and waited for him to return from the movies. Near midnight Lew and Screwy appeared on the walk. Lew flinched when he realized someone sat on his porch, instinctively turned his bandaged shoulder away from me, again hesitated when he realized it was me.

"Sleeves?" he said. "What the hell are you doing here? You're in a bathing suit and wet and...."

"And you call me Screwy," Screwy said.

They sat on either side of me and I told him about the party, about Mr. Dalton and the mods.

"You know what the awful part is?" Lew finally asked.

I shook my head.

"I was really looking forward to beating the shit out of Bobby Preston for trashing your house."

I laughed, surprised at the sound of my own voice. "After what they did to you?"

"Sure, it's personal now. Then your mod buddies will pay. Then we'll get Mr. Dalton."

"Don't," I said. "You're better than they are. Leave it at that."

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Lew lit a cigarette. For a moment I felt dizzy watching the glowing ember, then the feeling passed. We shared the cigarette in the quiet and cool midnight.

At last I said, "I think I have to go to the Harvard Institute. I need to know about myself. I have to learn how to control this — whatever it is."

Lew nodded. "So Dalton wins after all."

"No," I said. "It's for my own sake. If I meet others like me then maybe we can learn from each other. I just know I have to try something different."

He nodded again. We shared another cigarette and then it was time to leave.

Screwy said, "We would have split up anyways. Next fall's high school. We'd go to the public and you'd go to the academy and we'd never see each other."

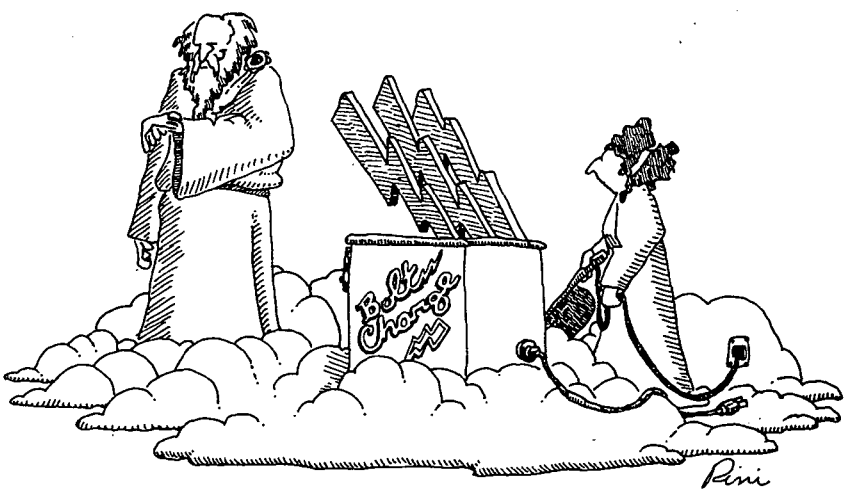
Lew said, "Sometimes he makes sense." We sat in silence for a while, then Lew said, "Take care."

"You too," I said.

I stand to leave, hesitate as again time slows down. Something is different. I do not know what, only feel the change. Then it makes sense.

Instinctively, I reach down and touch Lew's damaged shoulder.

The healing begins. ॐ



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PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

Missed Connections

by Jaime "Zero Degrees of Separation" Birch

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I WAS pedaling my training-wheel-equipped unicycle — a device whose inventor remains stubbornly anonymous — across London Bridge — the old structure, now transplanted into the desert wastes of the Colonies — when the effects of the unmediated solar photons landing on my fuzz-fringed bald pate and thus raising my cranial temperatures triggered one of my typical elaborate insights into just what a wild and woolly world of might-have-been "missed connections" we inhabit. My Amtrak Metroliner of thoughts (Philadelphia to Boston in only fifteen hours!; what would our ancestors have thought of that!) went something like this, as best as I can reconstruct the mental chain from engine to caboose as I lie here in my hospital bed.

One of the engineers (from the Greek, "en-gynos," or "watcher of women") responsible for reconstructing the London Bridge in the USA was named Gib Prinker. A graduate of MIT, Prinker had of course lived in Boston while attending that school (which never matriculated anyone from my family), since he found the daily commute from his native Moosescat, Wisconsin, beyond his capacities. While resident in "Beantown," Prinker began to wonder about his adopted home's nickname. A little research at various libraries (an institution developed during proto-Classical times, at an unknown location somewhere between Mohenjo-Daro and Brooklyn) soon revealed to Prinker that he had no idea how to discover this bit of trivia, and he quickly gave up and returned to his now much-quoted

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study, "Mozzarella As High-Tensile Denture Adhesive."

Had Prinker persisted in his quest, however, he would have discovered that the cognomen "Beantown" derived from the exploits of one Abraham Bean, early Massachusetts colonist. Bean (whose family in England hailed from Lower Twaddle, only a dozen counties away from my own birthplace) had nearly founded Boston, overshooting that city's current location by mere scores of leagues to plant King George's flag right where the construction of the Quabbin Reservoir would one day expunge all traces of his endeavor from the face of the globe. In honor of this, the capitol of the state was named after a common foodstuff which half the colonists couldn't tolerate.

The main ingredient of this delightful dish, the humble legume, *should* be our focus. Instead, we look to the familiar crockery in which baked beans are, well, baked. This type of pot owes its existence to German ingenuity. Hermann Schlegelmilch was a minor chemist in the town of Krebs-Rhenghune during the pre-heyday of the post-halcyon German dominance of the non-southern-hemispheric industrial establishment (circa 1650 AD or 329 BC). One day while testing various lacquers which he hoped would render the splintery seats of outhouses smooth to the touch, Schlegelmilch concocted a type of glaze with an incidental property that allowed ceramics not to interact atomically with the potent mustard most often used in baked-bean recipes. Dimwittedly, yet with high hopes, Schlegelmilch applied this fixative to a three-holer owned by Nasty Prince Ruprecht, causing a Royal Arse Rash and earning his subsequent beheading. (Only centuries later did some other German whose name escapes me rediscover this commercially valuable glaze.)

Mustard, of course, was first cultivated by the Hindu culture in the district of Kapok. Legend has it that the god Chakramulabonda first introduced mustard seeds to mankind. Because mankind had prayed, however, for potato chips, Chakramulabonda is little worshipped today.

Another deity little worshipped today started life as a historically verifiable mortal. Pompilius Rhinelander first appeared in the historical record in the year 1849, when he made a huge strike during the California Gold Rush. What Rhinelander struck was oil off the

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California coast. Building the world's first floating oil recovery platform (assembled out of milkweed pods collected by an army of women named, not as one might expect "Rhinelander's Rhinemaidens," but "those unlucky harlots grown too old for turning tricks"), Rhinelander soon became the richest man east of the Yangtze. Taking his vast fortune, he retired to a mansion in San Francisco, where he talked about funding a laboratory for the investigation of the potential uses of what he referred to as "an undervalued commodity," H_2O. (Apparently, Rhinelander had no idea what compound two atoms of hydrogen and one atom of oxygen actually constituted! Answer to be revealed in next month's column!) Anyway, nothing ever came of all this boastful hot air, and Rhinelander soon wasted his wealth in a series of wild parties, which earned him the aforementioned short-term worship from many sycophants and hangers-on.

Hot air today, of course, has numerous applications, not the least of which is drying hair. The first practical hair dryer — a behemoth weighing nearly six stones and standing ten hands high — was the lifework of Rapunzel Shoat of Bleeding Oaks, California. (Shoat was not one of the first female pioneers of technology, but merely a cruelly misnamed male.) In 1926, Shoat — through a company he had funded with his life savings and misleadingly named John Held's Flapper Girl Products — offered his patented invention to the marketplace, expecting many units to be eagerly snapped up. Not one was sold, however, and Shoat committed suicide by filling his lungs with hot air, not from his own machine but from the exhaust of a Model T.

Henry Ford never knew Shoat, nor did Thomas Edison. Other figures of that critically fertile period whom Shoat avoided meeting were Elinor Glyn, Charlie Chaplin, Albert Einstein (not the physicist, of whose existence Shoat was actually unaware, but the same-named sole barber in Shoat's hometown!), and a thirteen-year-old Richard Nixon.

Today, the President of the United States has many science advisors to help him guide the nation's policy toward research and development. One of the largest projects ever recommended by several administrations (both Democratic and Republican, but never third-party because no such candidate has ever been elected) was the

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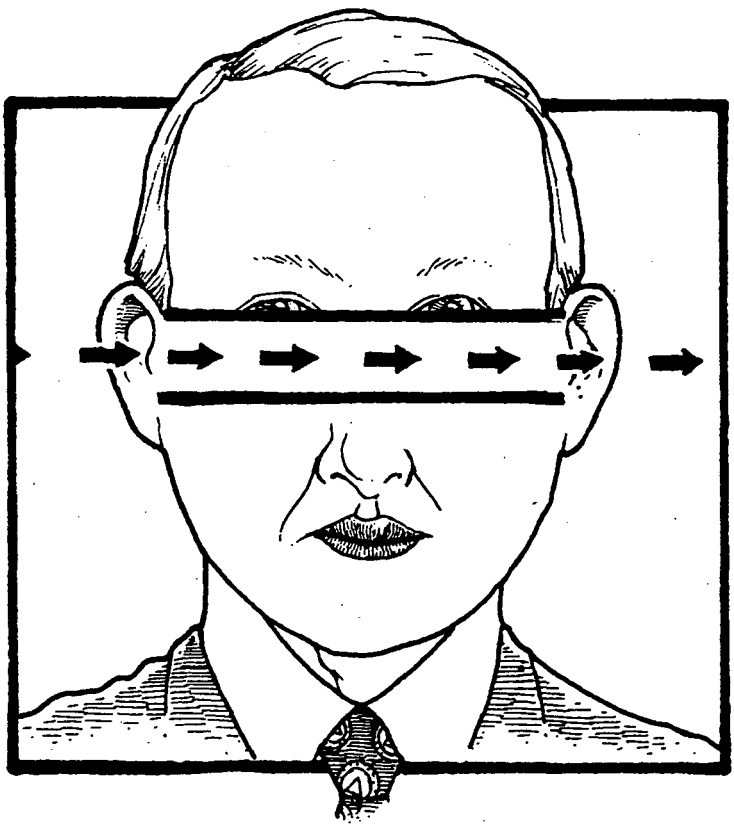
Superconducting Super Collider, which, as some of us in the know recall, was never built.

And that big expensive worthless hole in Texas is as close as we're going to get to my inexplicable and ill-fated pointless crossing of that little bit of Old Blighty far to the north. Except that both this mental hegira and my peddle-driven transit of London Bridge have left me with a splitting headache!



THE REAL INFORMATION SUPERHIGHWAY

Hong

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Shayne Bell lives in Salt Lake City and edited an anthology of sf stories by writers from Utah, Washed by a Wave of Wind. *His novel* Inuit *was science fiction, but this new story shows him to be very adept at contemporary fantasy as well.*

And All Our Banners Flying

By M. Shayne Bell

IN THE SUMMER OF THAT year, on my eighteenth birthday, I drove into Alma, Idaho, to register for the draft for the Indonesia War. I filled in all the blanks on the form, printed my name, *John Arthur Pembroke,* once, signed the form and handed it to the clerk. He looked at me as if he thought I had potential as a soldier. As soon as he okayed the form, I walked out of the office. I shoved my hands in my pockets and stood on the sidewalk in the morning summer sun for a while, thinking.

The war had dragged on and on — while I got older and older and was now draft age. If I stayed here, I would be drafted. I believed that. What the clerk inside didn't know was that I didn't have to stay in America. My mother was a citizen of Europe, with a United Kingdom passport. I was half Euro-British. At eighteen I had to choose to be either European or American, and if I chose to be European I wouldn't be drafted. Most of my friends thought I should take my chance and go to Europe and forget this place. I was the one who was not sure. I thought I wanted to be an American, though I did not want to have to fight to keep Indonesia

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together. No one had lifted a finger when Indonesia had forced the Mindanao Partition, then took over New Guinea, Palau, the Solomons, Sabah. Indonesia threatened Singapore, Brunei, and the rest of Malaysia in the short term. The corporations running America had argued that "unification" made the East Indies more stable. They offered increased trade as proof. A country like Indonesia could quiet down the region and organize its advance into sweatshops and ecological devastation. But the independence movements — in the conquered territories and on other islands: Borneo, Bali, the Moluccas, Timor — kept growing stronger, with covert Chinese, Japanese, and probably Thai help, and now America was once again defending "vital interests" (oil, cheap goods) in Asia.

I walked down the sidewalk thinking that, were it not for my mother's nationality, the course of my life would have been out of my control. For three years in a row I'd watched pudgy military officers on TV spin a Vietnam-era basket with three hundred sixty-six little plastic capsules that held slips of paper with dates printed on them, one for every day of the year and February 29. The officer would pull out the capsules one at a time, open them, and read off the dates. The guys born on the first two hundred twenty-five were drafted. Not all of them came home. For three years my birthday was one of the first two hundred twenty-five, and I had to sit there, with my high school math or geography homework unattended in my lap, watching a fat officer represent chance determining my fate. But thanks to my mother, chance would not determine my fate where this war was concerned. I would.

I drove our Ford pickup home, parked it in the shade, and walked slowly to the house. I needed to change back into work clothes and start hauling hay. Mother was stirring a cake in the kitchen, the birthday cake we'd have with dinner that night, and she looked up at me with worried eyes. She wiped her hands on her apron and hugged me and wouldn't let me go change for a while, she just held onto me.

That night, for my birthday present, she and Father gave me a ticket to England to visit my Aunt Alice, Mother's sister; Aunt Alice's two children, my cousins Emily and Clayton; and Uncle Harold, Mother's brother who had never married but who had "tramped all over the world," as she would put it; "explored the dark corners," he would say. Mother was so happy that I would finally get to see the places she loved, the house

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she had grown up in, the England of the Arthurian legends she'd told me when I was a boy.

But it was more than that, of course. I lay in bed that night and realized my parents' present to me was more than a ticket. It was a chance to look around England and make my choice. My parents had said nothing about this over dinner. We'd talked about it plenty of times before. But my choice had been with us through the meal. I knew Mother considered herself blessed to be able to give her son what all mothers would have given if they could: a sure way out of war, to life.

IF YOU HAD LOOKED at Emily and Clayton and me that summer, you could not have known what all of us would go on to do with our lives. I look at the old photographs Aunt Alice took of us together and see young people with nothing to set them apart. Clayton and I were barely shaving, maybe every other day, and I still had half an inch to grow, Clayton maybe an inch and a half. But one thing about Emily has never changed: in those old photographs and in the pictures of the woman I now see in the netzines, her long, black hair is wild, windblown, as if she spends the better part of each day walking along the Somerset coast with the wind off the sea blowing her hair.

At the time, Aunt Alice was a newly elected Member of Parliament, but Parliament was in recess, and Emily was on holiday from her boarding school. They picked me up at Heathrow, and we drove across the moors to Somerset and the family ancestral home on the west bank of the Parrett River, near where it empties into the sea. I could smell the sea when I got out of the car.

And apples. The house was surrounded by apple orchards, and the apples were ripe and falling. The ground was littered with golden and red apples. A handful of workers holding remotes walked around under the trees. I did not understand what they were doing till I saw a flash of silver metal moving high up in one of the nearer trees. I stared, then. The workers were guiding robots picking the apples. No one I knew in Idaho had robotic help in the fields. Central American human labor was still cheaper for us.

"Those are rare apples," Aunt Alice said. She came to stand by me.

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"Some of the varieties are, perhaps, found nowhere else — and it's a good thing someone has them. Apples are in a precarious way worldwide. People grow ten percent of the varieties our ancestors grew just one hundred years ago. A disease could destroy any species that reduced. I feel our rarities might someday be important for grafting strength back into the main stocks."

She talked with me easily about her orchards. She had always talked to me, even when I was a boy during her visits: even then she would take the time, and I loved her for it. Now, as then, I found myself interested in whatever she wanted to talk about — Central Asian politics, Uzbeki terrorists, modern poets, apples. Her breadth and sincerity, always clear to me, were what eventually made her foreign secretary to two prime ministers in Brussels. But I always remembered her worry about the apples and was not surprised years later at her treaties with Kazakstan, and her work to preserve the ancient apple forests there where apples had first evolved.

"Emily will show you the orchards after you unpack," Aunt Alice said.

Servants came to help carry in our bags. Aunt Alice gave me a room on the third floor, with windows looking out toward the sea, which I could see beyond the trees. I'd seen the sea only twice before, in California, at Malibu and Laguna Beach, and I suddenly wanted to get down to this sea and walk along this beach. I unpacked quickly and thought I should tell Aunt Alice where I was going. I hurried down to the main floor, looking for her.

The house was quiet and cool in the afternoon heat. I kept thinking of my mother growing up here. I tried to imagine her as a little girl and later a young woman on these stairs, walking these hallways, opening doors into all these rooms. I walked through an open door into a great room paneled in dark wood. An enormous stone fireplace stood in the far wall, and over the mantle hung a sword. I walked to the sword. It looked heavy and old. The hilt was worn, but the blade had been kept polished and it shone even in the dim light. Latin words were inscribed on it near the hilt.

"Do you read Latin?"

It was Emily, standing in the doorway.

"A little," I said. I'd taken a Latin class in high school, the standard beginners' course.

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Emily crossed to the windows and pulled back the drapes. In the sudden light, I could read this Latin: Ex Calibur.

"You men are so predictable," Emily said. "I asked Mother whether I would find you in this room looking at this sword, or whether I would find you in the library looking at the books. We both decided on the sword."

"I never saw the library," I said, a little annoyed.

"Let me show you where it is."

I followed her and never asked, then, about the sword and its fanciful inscription. The library was down the hall, and it was enormous, paneled in the same dark wood as the room with the sword. All the bookshelves were made out of that wood. I felt the rough finish on the shelves while Emily again crossed to the windows to open the drapes.

"Lyonnesse wood," Emily said, watching me.

"I've never heard of it."

"Here." She carefully took a book down from its shelf: Richard Carew's *The Survey of Cornwall*, published in 1602. She set it on the table. The book crackled when she opened it, but it was not dusty. She turned the pages to an account of a sunken forest between Cornwall and the Scilly Isles.

"The wood from this forest used to wash up on the beaches, even as far north as here in Somerset," she said. "People gathered it and made things out of it, like this house."

"This house is built out of driftwood?" I asked, incredulous. I didn't know what to make of Emily then. I couldn't decide whether she was teasing me — telling me fables to see whether I was simple enough to believe them — or whether she was telling the truth.

"Oh, not just the house," she said. "Some of the furniture, too. We have a table made out of it. You'll see. Tristan came from the land where these forests grew."

I decided not to ask if she meant the literary Tristan, but I had an idea that she did. All of this was starting to come together in my mind to make me see the great joke I was being led up to: a sword inscribed *Ex Calibur*, wood from a sunken land, mention of a knight of the round table. "I'd like to walk down to the sea to look for some of your driftwood," I told her.

Emily reshelved the book and while she did she quoted part of a poem to me:

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Say if we three
Will go to the sea
To gather dark wood on the beach.

"What is that from?" I asked.

"A poem I'm writing," she said. "Let's do walk to the beach. It will inspire me. I'll tell Mother where we're going."

She left, and I walked over to look at the books shelved near the Carew, all of them in sunlight near the window. The first were medieval books written in Hebrew. Some had apparently been translated into Latin, a few into English: *Legends of the Jews, The Book of the Jests of Alexander of Macedon, King Artus.* Other nearby shelves held books in other languages: Robert de Boron's *Joseph d'Arimathie,* subtitled *Roman de l'estoire dou Graal,* Eschenbach's *Parzival,* a book titled *Queste del Saint Graal.* Of course I found Mallory's *Le Morte d'Arthur.* Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* lay open on the table.

All this began to explain my mother's fascination with Arthurian legend. She had grown up surrounded by all these "artifacts." Someone in the past had loved the legends of Arthur and had collected these books and the sword. My mother had loved them in her turn, and she'd made me interested.

Emily came back for me, and we walked through the orchards and picked apples and carried them to a rocky beach strewn with driftwood, though none of it dark like the wood in the house. We spent the afternoon gathering driftwood into a pile taller than our heads for a bonfire we'd burn one night after Clayton and Uncle Harold came down from Oxford. The waves crashed on the shore and sprayed us with water. Emily wore no scarf, and I had no hat. We let the wind blow our hair.

Clayton and Uncle Harold drove down from Oxford that evening. Clayton was in his first year reading mathematics at Oxford, and Uncle Harold lectured there on history. They arrived just before dinner. Clayton and I looked a little alike — you could tell we were first cousins. Uncle Harold was as tall and thin as I remembered, with white hair, a white mustache and trimmed beard, and bright, happy eyes.

"Tell me about Mary," he said, and I told him about my mother and

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gave him a letter she'd sent with me for him. He had me describe our farm: how many thousand acres it had now, how many head of cattle, the value of the land per acre. It was more than just polite interest, I knew. He and Aunt Alice had invested a small fortune in the farm when Mother married, took her inheritance, and went to live in America.

After we had talked for maybe ten minutes, Uncle Harold got up and rushed around the house: he ran up the stairs to unpack; he ran back down to the library to quickly read my Mother's letter, stuff it in a pocket, then pull books from the shelves and sit at the table, reading, following his fingers hurriedly along the lines; he hurried to supper when Aunt Alice called us.

And, of course, the dining-room table was round. It was made out of the same dark wood as the paneling and shelves. I stood there smiling at the table until Aunt Alice asked me to sit between Emily and Uncle Harold.

"This is the table I was telling you about," Emily said.

"Made out of wood from a sunken forest," I said, touching its ebony, polished surface. I expected someone to laugh, but no one did.

"It could be that old," Aunt Alice said. "At least it's old enough to be wobbly. The wood certainly came from the sea. No trees with wood this dark grow in England."

"There's a darker wood in the Celebes," Uncle Harold said. "Rare now." And he began a story about how he had once worked his way through the interior of Sulawesi, looking for a rumored Malay city in the highlands that had never submitted to the Dutch or to the independent Indonesia, and which had already been Christian before the Dutch or even the Portuguese had sailed to the East. On his way there, Uncle Harold and his porters had come across a small, black tree growing alone on a barren hillside. The porters had cut it down, carried it with them, and sold it for a fortune in Ujung Pandang when they'd returned to the coast.

"But what about the Christians?" Aunt Alice asked.

The conversation went on like that through dinner. Uncle Harold had lived a remarkable life, some of which I had followed in his letters to Mother and much of which Mother had told me about: years with the Army of Europe in North Africa when Europe had been forced to secure its southern border and liberate the peoples of North Africa from the thugs who'd ruled them. He'd crossed the Sahara three times, become lifelong

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friends with Coptic monks, and wrote a history of their order; later, he'd spent years exploring the Himalayan foothills in India and Nepal, looking for signs of the Nestorians — "Or the Yeti," he said, with a smile — and poking into Bhutan and Mustang, Sikkim and Tibet, and finally the outer islands of Indonesia, writing the histories of little-known places and forgotten peoples. But I kept thinking about war. He had fought in a war. Eventually I asked him about it.

Everyone looked at me. "Those were glorious years," Uncle Harold said, after a pause. "Never has good and evil been so clearly allied with opposite sides in a modern conflict. Those lunatics with nuclear bombs had meant to take over Europe, loot it, convert any survivors to Islam on the point of a sword — can you imagine it? In this age?"

Two women came in and took away the dinner plates, then served dessert.

"Have you considered studying at Oxford?" Clayton asked me, and I realized they were all wondering whether I had come just to visit or whether I had come to stay. I looked at the dark paneling and the dark furniture and the bright, kind, intelligent faces around the table, and felt I would be welcome here.

"I've considered Oxford," I said. "My father and mother recommend applying."

We talked, then, about the war in Indonesia and, typically European, they were all against it.

Aunt Alice and Emily went up to bed soon after dessert. Uncle Harold went back to his books, and Clayton and I played chess in the room with the fireplace and the sword till he couldn't stay awake any longer and went to bed. I couldn't sleep. It was morning in Idaho, and my body hadn't adjusted to the new time. I sat at the chess table and looked at the sword above the mantle. On an impulse, I got up and took it down and tried to hold it.

It was heavy. With both hands on the hilt, I could lift the sword above my head and even swing it, but I tried to imagine fighting with it — the weight would have made it unwieldy in my hands. The men who had fought with swords centuries before had held them in only one hand and a shield or battle ax in the other. If I had had to fight on a medieval battlefield, with weapons this heavy, I would have been killed in short order: I could not have handled my weapons.

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I put back the sword and decided I should go to bed to try to sleep and get accustomed to the new schedule. On the way to the stairs, I passed the library. No one was in it. Uncle Harold had gone.

But the room was lit with one guttering candle on the table. The sight of those books in their shadowy shelves and the pool of candlelight on the dark table strewn with papers and books has remained etched in my memory. I walked to the table and saw that someone had turned *Idylls of the King* to a new page. Uncle Harold had pulled down old Dutch books on the East Indies, and one of his own, his *History of the Celebes and the Outer Moluccas*. His book was left open on the table, and he had taken a pen and crossed out three paragraphs in chapter nine about the early Christian missionaries and penciled notes in the margin. He must have been preparing the book for a reprinting. The papers at the far end of the table were poems of Emily's, in progress. The top paper read:

Say if we three
Will go to the sea,
To gather dark wood on the beach.

We'd burn it at night,
To tame with the light
The creatures that haunt us in dreams.

I put down the poem and thought I should not look at Emily's papers like this. I walked up to my room and went to bed. When I finally slept, I dreamed I was with armies of men fighting with swords and battle axes on a Somerset beach where great bonfires burned. My opponent was potbellied, but strong. I could barely lift my sword and shield, they were so heavy, but he could handle his quite well. All I could manage to do was parry away his thrusts and stabs and keep backing up toward the sea.

He was going to kill me.

"Who are you?" I asked him, breathless.

"Robert de Boron," he grunted, and I thought, good, if he's Robert de Boron, the writer, maybe I can reason with him, so I tried to keep him talking. "Why do we have to fight like this?" I asked. "We shouldn't be here. What kind of work did you do before the war, anyway?"

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"I was a baker," he shouted at me, and my heart sank to think that a man who had baked pastries and bread would kill me. He wasn't a writer at all, he just had a writer's name. I kept talking to him anyway, telling him I had been a farmer and that my family had crops in the field that needed to be harvested, and eventually I asked him not to kill me. He looked at me oddly, but stepped back, and we stopped fighting. I shouted at my friends to stop, and the baker shouted at his, and eventually everyone did stop fighting and our two sides separated and went to the bonfires to cook supper. I would not sit by a fire to eat, because I did not trust the peace to hold, and I hurried through the crowds looking for a blacksmith. I wanted to ask him to draw off some of the metal from my weapons to make them lighter so I could handle them —

And I woke. I looked at my watch. It was four in the morning. The moon shone softly through the window. I lay there remembering my dream. The guns I'd carry in Indonesia would be as heavy as the old sword downstairs, and many times more deadly. It wouldn't be like in my dream. If I went to war I'd first be taught how to handle my weapons.

And I would have to learn that, I realized. I would have to learn how to use deadly weapons. I decided that, lying there in the dark. America had been my country all my life: it would be my country for the rest of it. It needed people who would do what I was going to do. I did not support the war. If America were fighting to protect an ally from tyranny I would *join* the army, but that was not what this war was about. So the army of my country would have to draft me to get me to fight its current battles. What mattered was what would come after.

I sat up and saw myself darkly in the dresser mirror. I would have to live with this decision and remember it every time I looked in a mirror the rest of my life. People back home would support me at first, before they knew what I was going to do. The peace movement was not loved, yet. It didn't matter. I would go to war, then come home to work for the peace movement. I'd have more credibility if I had seen war and afterward worked for peace. It was the only way I could think to make it work. Insisting that one's country live up to its highest ideals was not unpatriotic.

I resented being eighteen and forced to make decisions like this. But when, I wondered, in the history of humankind hadn't eighteen-year-olds been forced to make decisions about killing and being killed?

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A wind was blowing, and I could hear the sea crashing on the beach. I got up to look out the windows and saw Uncle Harold pacing back and forth on the lawn, out toward the orchards. His hair and beard were white in the moonlight. He would pull on his beard, then gesticulate with his hands as if he were carrying on some argument in his mind or attempting to convince someone of a course of action he feared or found preposterous. I thought he looked like Don Quixote, parted, somehow, from Sancho and Rocinante. Or maybe Sancho was sleeping in the orchard and this pacing of my uncle's was some knightly vigil he had to keep to honor a vow.

I watched him and thought how he had fought in a brutal war for ideals he believed in, and he'd seen his side triumph. The North African War had been a grand effort, so different from what I would be called to take part in.

I watched Uncle Harold and thought of his interest in Arthurian legend — of the interest of all my British family in those legends — and how it was not the Arthurian wars they cared about, despite the sword's place of honor above the mantel. It was the love in the Tennyson poem; the magic, in Emily's poem. I began to wonder, given Uncle Harold's delving into the histories of Nestorian and Celebes Christians, whether his explorations and studies were a continuing quest for the Holy Grail.

I DECIDED NOT to say anything about my decision for a few days. I wanted to enjoy a little more time in England before facing my relatives' questions. Uncle Harold was not at breakfast. Aunt Alice was in a hurry to get back to Brussels and Parliament, which had been called into session to debate an American request for logistical support in an ongoing offensive. Emily and Clayton and I tried to stay out of her whirl of activity and waved good-bye to her from the steps. When she was gone, Emily and Clayton looked at me, and we all went inside and met Uncle Harold in the hallway.

"You have just enough time to make your banners before we set off," he said.

"To where?" Emily laughed.

"The beach, a bonfire, and your fates!" he answered.

I laughed, but servants came in with poles for each of us to fly banners from, and Emily took Clayton and me upstairs to the second-floor sewing

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room where she pulled out boxes of scraps of material of all kinds and colors, and we actually started making banners to carry before us on a walk to the beach.

It was slow going for Clayton and me, since the sewing we had done up to that point amounted to sewing buttons back on shirts. Emily found three long strips of white cloth, sewed them around the end of her pole, and left to pack a picnic lunch. Clayton wanted a red banner because he'd become a Marxist, as he called it, at Oxford, but we couldn't find any red scraps, so he had to settle for burgundy. I cut equal lengths of blue, orange, green, and purple cloth and made a banner that would fly like a rainbow.

I finished last, and when I got downstairs I saw Uncle Harold taking the sword down from above the mantle. Clayton had found towels and swimsuits for the men and a tall umbrella. Emily came from the kitchen with a picnic basket, sunscreen, and her towel and swimsuit under her arm, and Uncle Harold led us out, sword held before him, the three of us following along behind with our banners blowing in the wind.

We picked apples off the ground in the orchard to take with us. I carried the picnic basket. When we came to the beach, Uncle Harold had us post our banners on three different peaks of rock around the driftwood Emily and I had gathered. We spent the day swimming, laughing, lying in the sun. We ate the picnic lunch late in the afternoon.

At dusk we lit the bonfire, and it roared above us. We had to stand back quite far until it burned down and we could sit on rocks close to it. Uncle Harold suddenly stood and thrust the sword into the sand in front of Emily, Clayton, and me. He stood there with his hands on the hilt, looking at us, knightly, somehow, the way Don Quixote must have looked even as an old man. I didn't know what to expect. Emily and Clayton looked a little bewildered, too.

"I am the oldest in our family," Uncle Harold said, finally, "and as such I have brought you here to perform a sacred duty. This night I will knight you into the order of your family."

This was unexpected, but theatrical, and I found myself wanting to go along with my uncle's fun. So I didn't laugh. Our banners snapped in the wind in the rocks above us.

"First hear the history of your family," he said. "And believe it. You are descended from Arthur, King at Camelot, he of legend."

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"And Guinevere?" Emily asked. She looked startled, as if this talk of Uncle Harold's were confirmation of a history she had guessed at.

"Yes," Uncle Harold said. Emily brushed back her hair and looked at the fire. Her reaction surprised me. It was hard for me to take this seriously. Clayton was watching Uncle Harold intently but said nothing.

Uncle Harold looked at me till I'd stopped smiling. None of us spoke. I could hear only waves crashing on the rocks and the bonfire burning till Uncle Harold spoke again.

"Your Great-Uncle George brought your mothers and me to this beach thirty years ago and knighted us: Alice to the work of state, that she might preserve the political integrity of this land; Mary to the nurturing of farmland, which would blossom for her and increase the fortune of the family; me to the pursuit of knowledge forgotten in the West, but kept alive in hidden places of the world."

He went on to tell us the "history" of our family and how the dream of Camelot had been kept alive through generations, not centered on a place, but realized through the lives of its descendants who had worked to benefit humankind, who had given their lives to high causes. To be knighted with Ex Calibur would be to accept a mantle of obligation to humanity. More than that, we had been drawn inexorably to our lives' works, he told us. We would do what this age needed most. Everything about our lives had been fated.

"Step forward, Emily," he said, "and kneel before Ex Calibur."

She did so, and her white blouse and black hair blew back in the wind. "I knight you, Emily, to the work of poetry," Uncle Harold said. "I give you the power to slay all dragons of despair, sloth, or rejection standing in the way of your insights and success. I bless you with the ability to bring written beauty to the lives of people who need beauty."

He drew Ex Calibur from the sand and solemnly touched Emily's shoulders with the blade of it, first the left, then the right, then the left again. He touched the sand in front of her with the tip of the sword to complete the shape of the cross, then he thrust the sword back in the sand. Emily's eyes shone. She stood slowly, almost regally, and did not sit down again. She folded her arms and watched the rest of us, her hair blowing wildly.

Uncle Harold called Clayton to kneel in front of the sword. "I knight

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you, Clayton, to the theories of physics," Uncle Harold said, "that you might lead humankind to the stars." He drew the sword out of the sand, touched Clayton's shoulders, and had him stand back by the fire.

I was next. I wondered what Uncle Harold would knight me to. He did not know me like he knew Emily and Clayton. I knelt before the sword. "I knight you, John Arthur, to the work of peace, that the world might rest and be blessed." And he drew the sword out of the sand and touched it to my shoulders. The blade gleamed in the firelight — or was it the moonlight? — for an instant, and I shivered. I stood and took my place around the fire. All four of us stood there quietly.

How had he known? He'd confirmed my decision. Suddenly it was as if I saw myself marching with thousands of others and speaking to crowds and writing works that transformed nations and sent all bakers home from the battlefields.

"I charge you," Uncle Harold said, "to call together the young of the family when they are of age to knight them in their turn."

They'd planned this, I suddenly knew — my mother and my aunt and uncle. This was why I had had to come to England. I did not question, then, whether Uncle Harold's history of our family was true. Facts did not matter to me at that time: I wanted his story to be true. I suddenly wanted the sword to be Ex Calibur; the round table in the dining room, if not the original, at least patterned after it; and all the dark paneling truly from the sunken forests of Lyonnesse.

"Gather your banners!" Uncle Harold cried, and we scrambled into the rocks after them. I felt closer to Emily and Clayton then, different from the way I'd felt about them before: from that day on we were more than family; we were knights on a quest together. I could sense the beauty and adventure and hope we would each bring into the world before we had done it.

Uncle Harold led us back through the darkness, guided only by moonlight, through the orchards of apples so fragrant in the night. For the first time in England I remembered my mother's stories of Avalon and its apple orchards, and I shivered again and looked at the moonlight gleaming on the blade of the sword my uncle held. I lifted my banner higher, then, at the sight of it, for Emily and Clayton and I brought along with us our dreams now, bright and alive in us, and all our banners flying.

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Joel Lane won the British Fantasy Award for his short-fiction collection The Earth Wire. *His most recent book is a collection of poetry,* The Edge of the Screen. *Chris Morgan edited the anthology* Dark Fantasies *and authored* The Shape of Futures Past, *a history of predictive science fiction. Both British gentlemen live in Birmingham. This vivid horror story they've concocted suggests that hotel management might be a dying art in England.*

Feels Like Underground

By Joel Lane and Chris Morgan

IT WAS THE COLDEST MORNING so far this winter. The clouds had blurred into a whitish gauze, through which the sunlight glittered like patches of frost. At first, he'd thought the car would never start. Then he'd lost an hour queuing behind lorries and buses on the Warwick Road, where the open-plan traffic system seemed to induce a kind of collective paranoia. It wasn't until he got past Solihull, and the landscape opened out into soft fields and perspiring woodland, that Mark began to think about the conference ahead. Two days of market-speak, management-speak, the voice of the corporate sphincter. Two days of spreadsheets, SWOT analyses, performance indicators, e-mail numbers, acetates and acronyms. Two days of Brian's cigars and Gareth's nervous jokes. Two nights with Cathy.

The hotel was near a village called Wormleighton, out in the extensively franchised wilds of rural Warwickshire. It was called the Pines. According to Gareth, who'd stayed there for a similar conference in 1993, it had a kind of Swiss/Austrian feel. "Sort of a Black Forest château." In his conference folder, Mark had a leaflet about the hotel. It showed a

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murky, *faux*-Gothic building, surrounded by fir trees. There was a small lake to one side, probably artificial. The leaflet concluded with the message: *You'll be pining to return.* Cathy had said it reminded her of a Leadbelly song about jealousy, about a murdered husband. Mark hadn't known what to say to that.

Cathy was the human resources manager at the Bromsgrove site. Mark was a production manager at the Knowle site of the same company. They'd met at a sales conference the previous year, and again at the Christmas party. Which was where the affair had started, really, though they hadn't slept together until a hastily arranged night just before the New Year. It wasn't just the need for discretion that made him cautious. Mark didn't want to get in so deep he couldn't get out again. Cathy understood. Her marriage was a lot shakier than his; but even so, she wasn't the kind to take risks. It had to be kept on ice, like a bottle of vodka you were saving for a special occasion. Still, he'd been looking forward to this weekend in an increasingly obsessional manner over the last couple of weeks. Whatever the room arrangements were, they'd find a way to be together. She'd promised that, in an almost tearful mid-evening call from her office to his. A call that had ended with them listening to each other's breath, as if they were falling asleep in the same bed.

The sketch map in the conference folder showed a narrow road going through Wormleighton, then uphill to the small forest around the hotel. Mark saw a gray stone tower, then a partly ruined manor house. He glanced at the fields, seeing horses, cattle and, unexpectedly, a chestnut-coated stag. Jackdaws circled in pairs above the trees. The roadway was smeared with frost. He slowed down, unsure of the route. A flash of sunlight melted the windscreen, dazzling him. The image of Cathy floated behind his vision. Her short auburn hair, cut in a high fringe at the back. Her upturned nose. Her beautiful smile, the teeth just a little too strong. Her dark, painful eyes. Mark shook his head, banishing the image. The road was lined with trees now: firs, cedars, pines. Almost the only green things left in January. Winter felt like an absence, not a season at all.

Suddenly, the view to one side fell away. A small lake was set in the hillside. Almost circular, frozen. It must be far colder here than in the city. The ice was gray with blotches of white. Two kids were skating on it. Mark slowed down to watch them. A boy and a girl, about fifteen,

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similarly dressed in ski jackets and black jeans. Their linked hands were ungloved. It was like the slow dance at the end of a disco. He felt like a voyeur; but it was hard to look away. The car stopped, braked, stalled. The couple moved together, spiraling outward in a shared arc. They kissed. Mark was suddenly aware of the frozen mass that held them up. The coldness that freed them to move and touch. He turned the key in the ignition and drove on.

Half a mile further, the road widened into a car park. The hotel was there: dark, angular, unexpectedly small. Most of its windows were shuttered. There were traces of snow on the surrounding trees, though he'd not seen any driving up here. As he got out of the car, the sunlight flared like burning plastic. Cold air scratched at his face. As he pulled his suitcase out of the boot, he realized he was crying. Quickly, he wiped his eyes, hoping no one had seen him. Red eyes wouldn't look good at the conference; they'd think he'd been drinking. Around the car park, various familiar suits were getting out of burnished company cars. Without greeting any of them, Mark straightened his tie and walked into the hotel.

The interior was lit entirely by candles, high up in multi-armed candlesticks around the lobby and the staircase. Red velvet awnings and black furniture gave it a vaguely Gothic feel, like the set of a Roger Corman film. However, the lettering on the message board was wholly conventional. He gathered that the first seminar was in the Holst Room, followed by lunch in the Beethoven Suite. Mark's room was on the second floor. He decided to use the staircase, which looked like marble: a pearly white veined with crimson. The steps were a bit too large, and slightly damp; when he grasped the handrail, its surface was greasy with polish. The effort of climbing made him worry about his fitness. Too much driving, not enough exercise. On the first-floor landing, he glanced upward: a tight coil around darkness, like a fossil of some primitive organism.

Reception had warned him about the electricity in his room. You had to use the door key to connect it — unlocking the light, so to speak, before pressing the switch. The wavering candlelight from the corridor hardly diluted the shadows in the room. He fumbled inside the door, smelling dust and wax polish. Then the light sprang on: two yellow lamps in wall brackets, neither more than forty watts. If he needed to work in here, he'd

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complain. There was a low but comfortable-looking bed, with a red velvet bedspread and two black pillows. He lay back on it, suddenly aroused by the thought of Cathy. Would she be at the seminar? Forcing himself to think about work, he sat up and blinked at the wall. There was a picture of a forest, black distorted trees against a murky sunset. Or was it a fire?

Unpacking only what he needed for the seminar, Mark hurried back down the precarious steps to the ground floor. The Holst Room was probably as close to a normal conference room as a place like this got. Long, curved tables formed shells around a space at the back, where an OHP had been set up next to an old-fashioned lectern. The first few rows were full already. Mark nodded and smiled at a few colleagues; then he sat at the back, looking out for Cathy. No sign. During the next two hours, while the three Sales Directors droned on about marketing strategies and the audience laughed politely in what seemed the right places, Mark's imagination kept returning to the black-sheeted bed. He took notes dutifully, sketching cats and spiders in the wide margins. At least this room had electric lights, not candles. The final question-and-answer session dragged, sales colleagues asking for information they already had just to show off how well-researched the department was.

The Beethoven Suite was at the end of a long corridor whose walls were paneled in mahogany. The light from stainless steel candelabras glittered on crystal glasses and etiolated cutlery. Subdued music, probably that of the nominated composer, drifted from speakers in the ceiling. There was a buffet and carvery on the far side of the room. Just inside the door, a grand piano stood in dust-free silence. Mark couldn't help wondering if it might be an injection-molded replica. As he joined the queue, a hand brushed his arm. "Hi there!" It was Cathy.

For a moment, he almost reached out to hold her. The candles flickered, sending out a ripple of darkness. Then he recovered. "Cathy! How long have you been here?" It was getting harder to cover up in front of colleagues.

"About an hour," she said. "Some motorway trouble. An accident just in front of me. They took down my name and address, as a witness. One driver had to go to hospital. Then I got here...and got stuck in the lift. My room's on the fifth floor." Mark felt an involuntary twinge of disappointment. "Must have pressed the wrong button coming back down. The lift

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door opened, and there was just this wall. Brick and plaster. No light, outside the lift. I could hear something. Like...wax. Dripping. It was a corridor." She looked away. "I kept pressing buttons, but nothing happened. It was *cold* down there. I thought...then something connected and the lift shot back up to this floor. By the time I'd recovered and finished complaining to Reception, the seminar was due to finish."

Cathy was shivering. Mark squeezed her arm gently. "I'm okay," she said. Her smile made him feel breathless. *Be careful,* he thought. *This is dangerous.* For a moment, absurdly, he couldn't remember his wife's name.

The afternoon was slightly less dull than the morning. One of Cathy's colleagues from the bright lights of Bromsgrove led an imaginative (if slightly insincere) discussion on risk-taking in business management. Later, Mark gave a report on production control methods in the Glass Suite, a sparsely furnished room decorated with repetitive abstract motifs on tiny pieces of acetate. His small audience was too busy taking notes to appreciate any of the sarcastic asides — in particular, a reference to Volume 13, Issue 42 of *Which Mobile Phone?* fell absolutely flat. Worse, an older colleague came up to him afterward to ask whether the magazine was available from W.H. Smith's.

Then there was a break, during which he and Cathy slipped out for a quiet walk. It was unexpectedly cold; neither of them had an overcoat. Darkness was gathering in the trees, filtering down from the burnt sky. No one was skating on the lake; deep cracks ran across the ice, though not deep enough to expose the water. Near the edge, some black unfrozen pockets showed through. After checking that they were alone, Mark put his arms around Cathy and kissed her deeply. They rocked together, listening to the silence. Cathy's jacket rode up as she embraced him, the shoulder-pads trembling like vestigial wings. Without speaking, they returned to the hotel.

The final session before dinner was a report on ways the company was developing its use of IT resources. There were four speakers, including Cathy. She talked about ways the company could use the Internet for research and communication. "Of course, it's no more private than a noticeboard. But like our noticeboard, it's so crowded with stuff that no one knows what to look for or where. So information is only confidential

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if it's information that no one wants. For secrets, use the phone. For *real* secrets..." Cathy bent down and whispered something into Brian's ear. Mark felt an irrational surge of jealousy. *It was a joke,* he thought. *Lighten up.* Cathy glanced at him and smiled; he didn't manage to smile back.

Feeling angry with himself, and uneasy at the way things seemed to be changing, Mark went up to his room to unpack before dinner. This time he took the lift, and almost went flying when he stepped out into a corridor whose floor was about six inches below the lift floor. He limped to his room, unlocked the door and the light, and wondered whether the smell of wax came from the furniture polish or the candles in the hallway. There was a small chest of drawers by the bed; the top drawer at first refused to budge, then shot clean out from its runners, banging Mark's knuckles and almost hitting his legs. Reciting a list of obscure sexual practices, he replaced the drawer and put some underwear in it. Then he hung up his jacket in a wardrobe tall enough for suicide.

Familiar with hotel showers, Mark adjusted the temperature control before turning on the water. The resulting blast made him think of steam trains. Biting his lip, he turned down the temperature until it changed abruptly to lukewarm. There was no reduction in the force of the spray. The floor of the shower cubicle was smooth, not unlike the stairs, and became dangerous when coated with soapy water. When he stepped out of the cubicle, rubbing at his eyes, Mark discovered that the shower had sprayed copiously over the bathroom floor. He dried his feet while sitting on the bed. It was tempting just to lie down and think about Cathy. But that could wait. He wouldn't have to dream later. And he'd better get his feelings under control before rejoining the others.

Almost as an afterthought, he phoned Linda at home. The connection was faulty; as she talked about their son, Mark heard snow falling through the line into his head. "Those computer games we had to get him for Christmas — he hasn't touched them all week. Whenever he gets excited about something new, he thinks it's going to be important for the rest of his life. He's got to have it immediately...and then, a few weeks later, it's completely forgotten. He outgrows things, but he doesn't seem to outgrow...the mentality." *Or the need,* Mark thought with an irrational sense of bitterness. He said something noncommittal about Dominic having time to change. He was only nine.

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"That's the problem," Linda said. "These advertisers, they're destroying time. They're franchising childhood. It's not a process anymore, it's a market resource." As usual, Mark found himself both agreeing with her viewpoint and concerned about her state of mind. There was no sense in being an outsider. Linda's anger helped to give him a sense of purpose; but he still had to fit in, had to get along with the system. Did that make him a hypocrite? One more thing to feel guilty about.

There was a draught in the stairwell; Mark shivered as he negotiated the whitish steps. Gareth was standing in the foyer, wearing a horrible mauve tie. "Mark! Come and join the party. You need to join something." Mark followed him into the Brahms Suite, which turned out to be the bar. What a surprise. He downed a quick vodka and orange, trying to identify Cathy among the gleaming men and power-dressed women. Someone leaned back into the outer corner of a dado rail and cried out. "God! What's that doing there?" Tall candles flickered in brass rosettes. "There's something dangerous about this place..." *You don't know the half of it,* Mark thought. He shut his eyes and saw drifting squares of light crossing a blue surface: the Windows screen saver.

"Are you okay?" It was Brian, wearing a crimson silk shirt and looking concerned. Mark nodded and swallowed the last of his drink. The vodka felt colder inside him than the ice-cubes. He made for the Gents sign at the corner of the bar. It was dim and quiet in there; the piped music, presumably Brahms or perhaps Liszt, was more clearly audible. He splashed water over his face and blinked repeatedly. The window-images wouldn't go away. Like flaws in a sheet of ice. He wondered exactly what Gareth had meant about joining something. It could have been a coded reference to the staff Christmas party, when Mark had spent the whole evening talking with Cathy and ignored the various bonding rituals going on within his department. Or it could have had something to do with Mark's lack of political alignment, his occasional jibes at the major parties. The politics of his colleagues repelled him: both the knee-jerk Conservatism of the directors and the shallow attitudes of those managers who'd switched their allegiance from the ghost of Thatcher to the hologram of Blair. As if all that mattered was identifying and following the highest achiever.

His reverie was broken by the coughing of an elderly military-looking

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man in a yellow jacket. "They ought to change the mirrors in this place," the stranger muttered. "Whenever I look at one, I don't like what I see." Mark smiled in what he hoped was a supportive fashion. It hadn't occurred to him that there might be permanent residents in this hotel. He went back to the bar, where Cathy was waiting in a turquoise blouse and skirt that made the candlelight back off in astonishment. "Is your room comfortable?" she asked him, smiling. Her eyes were serious, almost frightened.

They ate in a different function room from lunch. Mark didn't see the name, but assumed it to be the Wagner Suite from the decor, which included plaster mountain-peaks molded onto the walls and a glittering silvery waterfall running into a trench at one end of the room. The ceiling was painted with a fluorescent Aurora Borealis. Large red candles melted over the wall surface, turning mountains to volcanoes and burning small mahogany villages. They drank some heavy Australian red wine and ate a mixture of game that included rabbit and venison. The music periodically drowned out conversation. Which, given that the conversation on both sides of Mark seemed to revolve around current trends in the business-related software market, was no great loss. Cathy was sitting nearly opposite him, too far away for their legs to touch. Their eyes brushed across each other every few minutes, caressing without holding. She rarely wore makeup, but tonight her lips were very slightly reddened. Or maybe it was just the wine and the flickering light.

Later, the gathering divided itself between several rooms. Most of the older staff settled in the Brahms Suite for a quiet drinking session. Mark decided to remain as sober as possible. Once he got past a certain point with wine or spirits, he lost the ability to stop. At one level, he wanted to drink until the conflicting voices of lust and fear dissolved into a bright silence. At another level, he knew that would be a criminal waste. He joined Cathy in the Saint-Saëns Room, where a fairly retrogressive disco was in progress. The sight of young executives reliving their teens, strutting and weaving to the sound of Donna Summer and Blondie, made him feel uneasy. You could play the same records all your life, but it was frightening how soon you forgot the moves. The room was oppressively dark and warm, with red velvet curtains and a black tiled floor.

After a quick trip back to the bar, Mark and Cathy went on to the Zann

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Room, where the younger staff seemed to have gathered. The music here was louder and distinctly atonal, a blend of techno and trip-hop that shuddered with confusion. Nobody was dancing very much. The walls were blue-gray, pricked with thousands of tiny lights like strange drifting constellations. Mark recognized Gary and Sue from the IT department; they were kissing slowly, their faces blurred by the moving lights. Sue waved at him and said something, but he couldn't hear her voice. He felt Cathy's hand on his arm, turned to see her mouth framing silent words. He reached up and touched her hair. They stood like that for a moment. Then Cathy smiled, tugged at his sleeve and led him out into the corridor.

They would have gone up the stairs together, but someone was lurking in the stairwell, watching the entrance. It was Brian. "Hi," he said a little drunkenly. "Feel a bit woozy. Too much red wine. Thought I might get an early night." He leaned on the banister, still gazing at the main doorway. Brian wasn't a drinker, Mark remembered. Maybe he'd broken his own rules. Cathy and Mark wandered awkwardly back into the Saint-Saëns Room, which was becoming crowded. On little tables around the floor, glasses jittered to the pedestrian beat of "Life in the Fast Lane." The smells of perfume, burnt wax and spilt wine stiffened the air. When it happened, it seemed like the room had been waiting for it. One of the heavier executives slipped on the tiled floor, staggered and fell. A woman grabbed at his arm, but missed and fell over him, her feet trapped under his jacket. Her pale wrist snapped with a sound like breaking ice. There was a brief silence. Then her shocked face released a thin cry, as if she wanted to scream but couldn't. Her right hand flopped like a glove until she gripped and straightened it.

The man on the floor sat up, breathless but apparently uninjured. One by one, the other dancers stopped moving. Another woman knelt by the casualty, spoke to her and helped her to her feet. Before the record had finished playing, two uniformed hotel employees came through a side door and led the injured woman away in a slow procession. Obviously someone would take her to the hospital — which might be as far away as Leamington. Mark didn't know who she was.

"They should have stopped the music," Cathy said. They were climbing the stairs together, Brian having disappeared. It was nearly

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midnight. "No one was moving, the DJ must have known there'd been an accident even if he didn't see it. Why didn't he turn the record off?" Mark didn't answer. Every step of the staircase felt like a hurdle between himself and Cathy. The lift would have been quicker and more discreet; but after Cathy's experience this morning, it didn't seem worth the risk. On the second floor, they paused. "Your room okay?" Mark nodded. He was glad of the alcohol, which was taking the edge off his panic. Under the soft fleshy glow of the wine, he felt like he'd been stuffed with darkness. The link between himself and his life outside was nothing more than a telephone line. He'd lost the code.

They were alone. Mark unlocked his door and reached for the light-switch before remembering to use his key. Cathy stood while he fastened the door and hung up his jacket. In the dim light, he could only see broad patches of color: the red bedspread, blue-green wallpaper, yellow lamps. The only sound in the room was their breathing. He put his arms around Cathy's waist and drew her against him. Her tongue was thin and soft, dancing in his mouth. He stroked her hair, running his fingers down to the back of her neck. *You're beautiful,* he whispered to her. Cathy's eyes clouded. *Don't say anything,* she whispered back. *Not now.* She was unbuttoning his shirt, her fingernails pricking his chest. He kissed her neck, feeling the pulse just under the white skin.

Half-naked, they pulled back the bedspread and climbed onto the taut black sheet, then folded themselves around each other. In the poor light Cathy's eyes were opaque, somehow lifeless. But her teeth glistened, and he could see the faint blush on her throat and collarbone. He reached between her legs and touched what seemed like a skinless muscle. The air was chilly, but they were both sweating. The surface of the bed was firm. Cathy gripped his penis and guided him into her, closing tight around him. Her fingernails drew tracks across his shoulderblades. After a few minutes, she pulled back and twisted over so that he could enter her from behind. Mark pressed the palms of his hands against her nipples and kissed the thin curve of her right ear. Somehow they were facing into the room by now, the pillows forgotten. A flicker of light on the wall made him look up. It was the forest painting. The sunset was moving through the trees, setting them on fire. The blue-green wallpaper seemed to ripple and flow like a tidal sea. The twin lamps stuttered their dirty brightness. Below

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him, Cathy shuddered as her cry broke into gasps. The wall was coming. The room was coming. He thrust deep and then held still, feeling the darkness inside him melt and escape.

It was only then that he realized he wasn't wearing a condom. Those risks weren't part of the plan. What was wrong with him? They disengaged and lay still for a while, in an uneasy silence. Mark wondered if the blind violence of their lovemaking was somehow a distorted expression of their growing depth of feeling. If so, it was a sign that things were getting out of control. As their bodies cooled, a chill seemed to rise through the mattress and make them embrace. Half covered by the velvet bedspread, they caressed and murmured tenderly until they were ready to make love again. This time, it was gentler and more human; they cried each other's name as their bodies crumpled together. Afterward, Mark lay awake in the darkness, wondering why the first time had been so much better. Maybe love needed some coldness to protect it. Fire and ice. *You're pissed,* he thought with some bitterness. Cathy had set the alarm for eight.

During the night, the fire alarm went off. Naked and shivering, Mark walked down a flight of concrete steps and along a whitewashed corridor. The fire escape presumably led out the back of the hotel, but he couldn't see where it ended. He was alone, but there were voices all around him. Everyone must have gathered down here. Cathy had gone ahead of him. After a while, he came to an open doorway through which pale lights flickered. There was an intense smell of melting wax. The voices were crying out, but not in pain. He stepped through the doorway and was suddenly trapped in folds of dark cloth.

The digital alarm clock ticked softly, as quiet as a dripping candle. It was nearly four o'clock. Mark was painfully aroused; but he'd have to wait until morning. Cathy was stretched beside him, her breathing only just audible. Suddenly his mind lit up with images of the basement. Ringed by the remains of candles, the dozens of writhing bodies. Scraps of underwear crumpled on hands and faces. Reddened skin, glistening with circles of wax and semen. A little furtively, he gripped his cock; but the images faded at once, leaving him confused and hollow. The dream reminded him of something he'd always imagined at company meetings: that wherever you got to in the hierarchy, there was some kind of inner circle you couldn't reach. The real party was one you were not invited to. The air in

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the bedroom was cool and smelt only of furniture polish, as if cleaners had come in the night and erased the residues of lovemaking. Mark tried to replay their desperate coupling of a few hours before; but it seemed facile, staged, like glossy soft-porn. He closed his eyes against the darkness and tried to float back into sleep.

It didn't work. A couple of hours later, his curiosity got the better of him. Moving as quietly as possible, he switched on the bedside lamp and put his clothes on, apart from his shoes and jacket. He closed the door carefully behind him and padded along the half-lit corridor to where he'd dreamt the fire escape to be. It was there; he must have seen it earlier. The door opened on a spring and closed silently when he released it. There was a long flight of concrete steps, going down into the heart of the building. The chill numbed his feet and made walking difficult. Some faint light, presumably moonlight, filtered through from above. The air was damp and still, like some rotten fabric he had to tear through to reach his destination.

At the foot of the stairs was an unlit corridor. He could feel paint on one of the side walls. The texture was soft and crumbly. There were no side doors. He thought the floor was damp, though there was hardly any sensation in his feet. Near the opening at the end of the corridor, he paused. There was no sound. He walked through, conscious of a growing sexual excitement. Another staircase, completely invisible. He thought the steps were metal and not entirely solid. Another corridor, less than three feet wide. He could hear the very faint sound of dripping, as regular as a clock. The corridor ended in a brick wall. Unless he'd missed it, there was no side exit. The fire escape was a dead end. He pressed his hands to the moist stone, bewildered by its refusal to yield. Suddenly all he wanted was to be asleep in bed.

It took him a while to get back, climbing stairs that felt uneven as well as steep. The sound of dripping faded above the basement level, and the silence frightened him. Eventually he stumbled through the doorway onto the second floor. It was daylight. His feet and the palms of his hands were black with dust. As he turned toward the corridor, a swing door opened. It was Brian and a teenage boy he'd not seen before. Feeling vaguely reassured, Mark crept back to his room and let himself in. The heavy curtains kept in the night. He undressed quietly and got into bed beside

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Cathy, who was still asleep. As his head touched the pillow, the alarm clock went off.

Breakfast was edgy and subdued. From the number of blank faces and dropped-shadow eyes at the table in the Stravinsky Suite, Mark suspected he'd not been the only one to have trouble sleeping. The unnatural dawn chorus of stringed instruments jarred his nerves. Too lively for winter. He learned that Tara from marketing, who'd broken her arm the night before, had stayed in hospital overnight and was going home today. That hadn't been the only accident: Gavin the Accounts Manager was limping after a fall in the shower. The left side of his face was bruised gray, like a school playground after rain.

The opening session was a workshop on time management. It overran by half an hour. Then two seminars ran concurrently: Gareth on what the company could learn from Japanese corporate strategies, and Cathy on managing human resources. For professional reasons, Mark had to attend the former. It dragged, like a haiku extended into fifty-five cantos. Cathy's sleeping face drifted across his field of vision, as perfect and expressionless as a mask. It scared him, to feel so deeply about something that would never be complete. It was trapped deep inside him: not guilt and not joy, but something in between. Her fluid movements tracked fire across the inside of his skull; the way she fucked was no more and no less beautiful than the way she drank coffee or sent a fax.

Just before lunch, they slipped away together and went back to the frozen lake. Mark thought he could see a pattern of circular skate-tracks, like the groove in a record. White vinyl. Yesterday's cracks were no longer visible. They held hands, listening to the minimalist percussion of bare twigs in the wind and the random cries of seagulls that were circling above the lake. Cathy was worried about her seminar. "You talk about *managing human resources*, it's like you've crossed a line between relating to people and using them. It's a science. I know the theory, every decision I make could be predicted by a computer. They don't want *me*, just a machine with my voice. Otherwise they'd have to admit that these *human resources* are actually people."

Mark wanted to say something, to reassure her; but he was thinking about his own managerial routines, the way he used staff appraisals and one-on-one scheduling meetings to control the members of his depart-

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ment. The same rationale: this isn't *me*, it's the company. This is how things are done. No wonder he felt cheated. They kissed slowly, their fear sheathed by the cold. The ice shimmered like quartz below them.

The whole afternoon was taken up by a company progress report, with several American directors in attendance. The air was thick with virtual dollar signs. Despite the company's record-breaking profits, every other word was about cost-cutting. Mark had been working to a shoestring budget for so long, it took events like this to remind him how much money the company actually had. The Managing Director, a man only ever referred to by his initials, laid heavy emphasis on the significance of budgetary control. "The key to successful expansion is effective downsizing. *We* need to be in control of the culture and the working groups in our various departments. *Our* culture, not someone else's. We're all working hard to phase out union recognition throughout all branches of the company. I don't need to tell you how important that is, with the prospect of a new British government letting in socialist legislation from Europe. The unions will be desperately keen to help ministers interfere in the way we run our business. Your jobs depend on keeping a tight ship."

Afterward, Mark stood at the foot of the staircase, gazing up into the cold white spiral and its missing heart. A rush of vertigo made him shiver. He felt like he'd been at a political rally. But it was only business. For a moment, he wanted to be free of everything. He'd wait until tomorrow before phoning Linda. His head was full of corporate rhetoric and pornographic images. It wasn't stuff he wanted to share.

That evening was quieter than the previous one had been. Perhaps the weighty presence of the MD and some of the directors, who'd turned up for the afternoon, was creating an atmosphere of restraint. People like that wouldn't risk denting the premiums on their health insurance policies. Whatever the reason, there was no disco. A long-drawn-out meal involving smoked sausage, veal pastries and chocolate cake was followed by an hour or so of obligatory and forgettable networking, then a quiet drinking session in a number of smoke-blurred rooms. Mark and Brian — who'd got over his embarrassment about the dawn incident when he'd realized that Mark didn't give a fuck about it — explored the ground floor, a labyrinth of tacky function rooms connected by dark-red corridors. Some of them

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were showing clear signs of neglect. The Elgar Suite, right at the back of the hotel, was an enclave of British Empire memorabilia where the hotel's older residents gathered to get quietly paralytic; visitors were not welcome. The Rachmaninov Suite was locked; dust furred the inside of the glass-paned door. From the dark interior, the restless sound of piano chords was just audible. The Cage Room was another bar, silent and empty apart from an effigy tipping an empty glass above its mouth.

Toward midnight, as the remaining drinkers were painting their inner landscapes with stars, Mark left Brian half-asleep in the Tchaikovsky Suite and went up to his room. There was a small plastic kettle and some sachets of instant coffee; he made a cup and drank it black, trying to sober up before Cathy arrived. He'd not seen her since dinner, when they'd made this assignation. After last night, the room seemed gloomy and impersonal, the forest picture unconvincing. Maybe none of it worked when you were alone. That was why he'd been unable to find the cellar. He was still thinking about that when he heard a light, rapid series of knocks at his door. He let her in, flicking the catch on the door as it snapped shut.

They sat together on the bed, holding each other as if any movement would risk separation. His hands moved slowly over her back and shoulders. Mark felt hollow with need. He suspected that if tonight didn't work out, they might finish. But talking about the future would only depress them both, strangling desire and isolating them in their separate rooms of guilt. It seemed like the only way forward was to fuck each other into an oblivion where anything could be said. To burn down the forest. *You're beautiful,* he whispered again. Cathy smiled. Her eyes widened, then closed as their mouths clasped together. He caressed her through her dress, trying to draw the naked Cathy out of the clothed one.

When they were naked on the velvet bedspread, she used her arms and legs to lift him clear above her, then slowly let him fall until his penis touched the smooth skin of her belly. He came within seconds of entering her, but carried on until she gasped and dug her nails into his sides. Once again, he realized, they hadn't taken precautions. The images of his dream returned; he lifted above her and let her stroke him until his semen was tracked across her pale skin. Then he pressed his face between her legs and probed with his tongue, pushing her knees up over his tense shoulders. They went on like this for some considerable time, until they were dry and

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narcotized with ecstasy and the sheets were a crumpled mess. Then they pulled the duvet over themselves and slept back to back, not touching.

It was still dark when the fire alarm woke him. He sat up and listened to its echoes dying in his head. The room was chilly and almost silent: the clock ticking on one side of him, Cathy breathing softly on the other. The truth was lodged in his head, as clear as ice. How it all fitted together: the company, Cathy, the hotel. *None of it worked when you were alone.* With Cathy, he could get into the basement. What happened there would enable him to keep her. He listened to her breathing. It was too shallow and uneven for sleep. "Cathy."

"Yes? Mark?" There must be a trace of moonlight in the room, since he could just make out the blurred shape of her head rising from the pillow. "What is it?"

"The fire escape," he said. "You must come with me. Please? You know what I'm asking. The party. The real party. You *know.*"

There was a pause. Then she said: "All right." She reached out and touched his face. They kissed, invisible like ghosts. Leaving the door unlocked, they walked naked along the corridor to the whitewashed door opposite the lift shaft. The stone steps were clammy and roughened by flakes of paint. Cathy put her arm around Mark's waist as they walked on into the total darkness of the corridor, and down the flight of braided metal steps. At the bottom, Mark paused. The floor was slippery with dried wax. There was a dim light at the end of the passage, flickering. As they walked on, he could hear the sounds from the room beyond. He slipped a hand across Cathy's breasts. The nipples were hard; she turned to kiss him. They walked together through the stone-framed doorway. There was no door.

It was a long, shallow room, roughly oval in shape, like one of the conference rooms upstairs. The center of the room was full of candles. More candles, in various tones of off-white and pink, hung on crude wire chandeliers from the low ceiling. Their wax had formed into the shapes of many interlinked bodies, some more complete than others. Hundreds of tiny flames winked and smoldered in the gloom; but there was no heat. The room was so cold that Cathy's breath clouded in front of her face. She stepped away from Mark, toward the edge of the many-limbed composite statue. Part of it reached up and gripped her ankle. She knelt and let the pale, waxy hand move slowly up her thigh.

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Mark glanced around helplessly. More wax figures were clustered around the edge of the room, embedded in the wall or each other. He could still hear the sounds of rhythmical kissing and slapping, the grunts and moans of bodies locked in passion. But the only movement he could see was far too slow; and the only faces were blank glistening screens, their eyes and mouths stopped with wax. Cathy was half-sitting now, her back curved, hands and feet dug into a mound of rippling flesh. A thick white candle was pressing between her thighs. Her eyes opened momentarily and she saw Mark. "Join us. Don't be a stranger." Then she twisted away and shuddered through the build-up of a violent climax. Mark watched, unable to react, as her legs kicked in the air and her right ankle broke like the stem of a glass.

He tried to reach her, but she was near the focus of the party and there were too many bodies in the way. Soon it ceased to matter, as hands and mouths fastened upon him and he was no longer alone. At last he realized, not only that the candles were people, but that the people were candles. The closer he got to them, the more human they were and the brighter they shone. However cold it might be, the party would go on. And it was freezing: he could see icicles in the dark ceiling, feel the crystals of ice on the tender faces. A weight of flesh on his arm tore the muscle, but he felt no pain. A drifting membrane brought him to climax and he ejaculated without pleasure, watching his semen freeze in the air. Someone cried out, and the rest imitated. Mark heard his own voice among them. The image of order and repetition grew in his mind. Like a spreadsheet. A spread sheet. Living in the ice, while the dance continued overhead.

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A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

FUTURE WONDERS: HIGH CHURCH AND KILROY

As soon as civilization arises, with its firm buildings and records, people begin striving to leave permanent markers in honor of themselves or their times. What can we learn from this impulse? Surely it tells us about why readers of science fiction love the long perspectives of space and time, a trait present in us all to some degree.

The ancient Greeks, the most influential culture of all time, encapsulated this by making lists of the monumental constructions they found most awesome, labeling them the Seven Wonders. Only one of these wonders of the ancient world stands today, the Great (Cheops) Pyramid. In a sense all the Seven Wonders were messages intended to provoke in us remembrance mingled with awe, and as such six have failed.

A tour of the sites of the Seven Wonders is instructive. No ancient could have seen them all, since they did not all exist simultaneously. There were several ancient lists of the Seven Wonders, each heavily favoring the Greeks, who wrote them. The Palace of Cyrus, king of rival Persia, was discreetly ignored. The Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem might have made the list, but was a shrine to a barbarian god, after all.

The fabled Hanging Gardens of Babylon, of which we have not a single authentic image, seems to have been abandoned and scavenged within centuries. No trace remains of them, and we have only a vague idea (from texts) of how the hidden plumbing kept them lushly green.

In present day Turkey stood the Temple of Artemis, built at Ephesus in 550 B.C. when the region was in the Greek cultural orbit.

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Writing in A.D. 60, Pliny the Elder called it "the most wonderful monument of Grecian magnificence." Made of white marble, it was 425 feet long, 225 feet wide, and its more than a hundred 60-foot stone columns supported a massive roof. Its ornamental sculptures and paintings were said to be of extraordinary beauty. Today a lone bare column sticks up from a muddy field, so unremarkable and unmarked that visitors often drive right past the site. Burned down in the fourth century B.C., the Temple was rebuilt in the third and then sacked and destroyed by the Goths in A.D. 362.

The most renowned sculptor of antiquity, Phidias, created two of the Wonders: the Colossus of Rhodes and the Olympian Statue of Zeus, around 435 B.C. The bronze Colossus stood as tall as the Statue of Liberty and was even more massive, yet fell in an earthquake only fifty-six years after it was erected. They were both vandalized by invaders within centuries. No authenticated parts survive.

The Mediterranean was a pleasant, warm region for developing human culture, but its crust was unstable. Several of the Wonders were damaged or destroyed by earthquakes. The Lighthouse of Alexandria, c. 280 B.C., stood a striking 350 ft. (105 m) high, dominating the harbor, but fell in an earthquake in the thirteenth century. Of particular poignancy was the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus (c. 352 B.C.) on what is now the Turkish coast. The widow of the tyrant Mausolus finished this tomb, spending a fortune embellishing the tower with the finest statuary and encrustations of the Mediterranean basin. Mausolus apparently began his own tomb construction, echoing the Pharaohs, who had work started upon their ascension to the throne; ruler cults demand constant attention.

As described by Pliny in the first century A.D., this magnificent tomb struck his era as comparable in impact with the pyramids. Tapered using three step-backs, the tomb rose some fifty meters to an artistic climax: thirty-six columns in colonnade supporting a roof whose twenty-four steps carry a colossal four-horse chariot of marble. With elaborate friezes carved in relief, one of battle scenes with centaurs, another with Amazons, and sculptures ranging from natural to colossal in size, its point lay below, where a staircase nine meters wide led down to the tomb chamber.

Mausolus was cremated before burial on a huge public pyre. His

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tomb was crammed with riches (all stolen later), stocked with slaughtered calves, cows, sheep, and hens, and cleverly drained by ducts along its walls. A solid pile of stone blocks filled the staircase, was covered with earth, and finally a plug rock barred entrance. Robbers plundered it by digging a tunnel into the rock beneath the foundations.

Mausolus ruled as a Persian satrap, filling his treasury by taxing even those who wore their hair long. He was shrewd, unscrupulous, and much feared and hated by his subjects, who several times attempted assassination.

The tomb gained its grandeur not from scale but from ornamentation, and this may well have proved its undoing. Shaken by a distant quake, statuary slid down the roof and crashed into other figures, such as the large stone lions who stood guard in front. There is archaeological evidence that this occurred. Shifts of the rock made the marble facing crack and peel away. Such degradations apparently disfigured the building long before it fell.

Finally, the structure proved top-heavy and vulnerable, so that a final quake in A.D. 1304 brought it all down. The Crusaders investigated the ruin, dug and found the burial chamber, but were forced by the raids of Arab infiltrators to abandon it at nightfall. When they returned the next day the tomb had been looted, and much of the testament to the greatness of the tyrant was gone. It was never recovered. Later these same knights used the ruins as a quarry to erect a castle that still stands today.

When I visited the site, littered with drums of stone that once were part of the grand columns, there remained only an air of shattered grandeur. Like several of the Wonders, this monument could have been repaired after quake damage, but the urge to do so had ebbed away. Mausolus's primary legacy is a word, mausoleum.

Not even all of the pyramids of Egypt survived. The vast mud-brick pyramids sustained serious quake damage. The large pyramid at Medium is today a three-step pygmy compared with the original, whose limestone outer casings form a jumbled skirt around it.

The Pharaohs apparently built the pyramids to solidify their hold on the world's first and greatest Thantocracy. Organizing society around death demanded convincing demonstrations of mastery by those who said they held open the portal to eternity. Shaped to call forth comparison with mountains,

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the pyramids were the largest objects visible within the narrow world of the river-centered nation. They made Pharaonic power obvious to all and promised a firm solution to the most basic of all human problems, the dilemma of death. Construction provided worthy labor to the peasant masses during the Nile's flood season, when idle hands might make trouble for the state.

The pyramid pinnacles carried capstones sheathed in gold; the only surviving specimen is covered in religious symbols. Greek travelers beheld the Great Cheops Pyramid clad in fine white limestone, a dazzling sight from many miles away with its gold peak. The limestone was stripped away millennia ago to build Cairo. We see only the core, rugged and massive and still awe-inspiring. Indeed, the pyramids were man-made mountains, proclaiming that the state could echo nature's feats.

Critics have berated the Pharaohs for spending great wealth on such useless monuments. Of course, the Pharaohs did not see them as useless, but rather as a sure way to gain a pleasant afterlife. Further, Egyptian engineers learned much about quarrying, shaping and maneuvering large blocks, learning that passed into humanity's general knowledge.

The Egyptians set a pattern seen often in antiquity. Ancient palaces were mostly built of mud brick, and eroded quickly. Since this passing vale of tears was far less important than an eternal afterlife, this was proper, just as building tombs and temples of stone fitted their enduring importance.

A funereal air surrounds lasting monuments down into our time. Tombs on aging European estates have outlasted several great houses nearby. Of course, even mass does not guarantee that your message will remain in context. The largest obelisk of ancient Egypt was 105 feet long and now resides in Rome, its intention ignored.

We cultural descendants of the Greeks have canonized the Seven Wonders, but equally powerful works appeared in antiquity, far from the Mediterranean Basin. The Great Wall of China, the only ancient construction so large it is visible from space, was unknown to classical Western civilizations. The huge dam at Ma'rib in Arabia and the Buddhist stupas of Ceylon surely would have made the list if the Greeks had voyaged farther. The Nazca Plain lines and Easter Island heads, while more recent, might have made the list.

Perhaps the best known archi-

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tecture of antiquity is the Acropolis of Athens, with its Parthenon and other buildings. It was not on most of the several Seven Wonders lists. Dating from the fifth century B.C., it was a trans-cultural religious site for Greeks, Romans, Christians, and Muslims. Some metal statues were "recycled" in antiquity. Removal of some pieces to indoor museums (notably the Elgin Marbles to London) prolonged the durability of some statues, friezes, and columns, and spread the Acropolis's renown as a cultural artifact worth preserving. Only modern acid rain has damaged it appreciably, arguing against returning the scattered pieces to the original, outdoor structures. The crowning glory of the Acropolis, the Parthenon, has become a pervasive standard for architectural beauty.

Strikingly, no libraries survived antiquity intact, though some were quite grand. (Pieces of some were salvaged and passed on.) A Christian mob burned the greatest trove of ancient writings, the Library of Alexandria, taking from us hundreds of thousands of papyrus and vellum scrolls. Writing on organic sheets is vulnerable to fire, whether from fanatics or accident. Acid-free paper withers in a few centuries.

Stone lasts. It is still the wisest deep time investment.

The oldest reliably dated structure in North America is a 5,400-year-old earthen mound at Watson Brake, Louisiana, fully two thousand years older than the much better known, classic mound-builder sites of other river valleys. Thousands of artificial mounds dot the U.S.A.'s east and midwest, shaped like serpents, giant cones or square platforms. Though some were used as ceremonial centers and slaughterhouses, their purpose remains mostly mysterious.

The civilization that built them had no writing or pictorial displays, yet sent the simple message of impressive large structures across millennia. Their prolonged earnestness is clear, since the Watson Brake site apparently took four hundred years to finish, yet trade and agriculture do not seem to be the primary motivations behind the builders. Asked for their purpose, an archaeologist remarked, "I know it sounds awfully Zen-like, but maybe the answer is that building them was the purpose."

No one ever lived in this mound area. Perhaps it had a special aim beyond the everyday. Such long-lived sites transmit a blunt signal of existence, no more. Perhaps this

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makes them all the more compelling, for the silences of such sites seems to have a significance of its own.

This brief tour of antiquity shows that the high cultures of many civilizations sought to propagate or commemorate themselves in permanent ways. That they often failed only underlines how difficult the task is. We know of many failures, but can only contemplate the probably larger number we do not know.

Doubtless many went to their graves believing some sliver of their identity would ring down through the corridors of time. Few did.

What will last from our own time?

In 1995 the American Society of Civil Engineers produced a list of the Seven Wonders of the United States. Two were holdovers from a similar list they compiled in 1955, the Hoover Dam and the Panama Canal. Dropped from that earlier list were the San Francisco Bay Bridge, the Empire State Building, the Grand Coulee Dam, the Colorado River Aqueduct and the Chicago sewage disposal system (surely a wonder suited particularly to engineers' discernment).

All these still proudly stand, but apparently the engineers now find them less wondrous. In merely forty years they have yielded to the Golden Gate Bridge, Manhattan's World Trade Center, the Kennedy Space Center, the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, and the overall Interstate Highway System. While the first two provoke awe, the others do not possess the singular impact I associate with wonder. This suggests that our sense of the awesome is quite personal. Deep time messages must speak to feelings of wonder that persist across both time and culture.

Arthur C. Clarke mentioned to me his choice of the Seven Wonders of the Modern World: the Saturn V rocket, the microchip, the rock fortress of Sigirya (a Sri Lankan temple invoked in his novel, *The Fountains of Paradise*), the Mandelbrot Set (a mathematical figure that set off the vogue for fractals), Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor, the giant squid, and SS-433 (an astronomical object that projects twin jets of matter in opposite directions from its core, moving at a precise fraction of the speed of light).

This is really a mixed list of accomplishments and objects, the last two natural. When I quibbled about this, he leaned back with his British grace and said, "I mean that discovering them is a wonder."

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Alas, Clarke's list betrays a distortion familiar in ancient inscriptions: up close, events loom large.

Minor battles seem to rival Gettysburg. Stature dwindles along with immediacy. His addition of the microchip suggests a difference between our present technological triumphs and those of the past. We can be inspired by quite tiny things that pack enormous information densities into their compass. But will such passing marvels provoke wonder in future minds?

This question suggests that we study the primary deep time communication methods used in the past, hoping they will work into the future.

Undertakings to convey the best of current culture seem to have had the best chance of surviving, for their beauty could protect them for at least a time from random vandalism. These attempts I shall call High Church: communicating the culture of the upper crust, usually solely of the politically powerful class. Often the High Church strategy conveys more than it intends; for example, we read into Egyptian hieroglyphics class and economic issues that the artists assumed natural and unremarkable, hence invisible.

A parallel note sounds down through the millennia: Kilroy Was Here. This rather mysterious graffito emerged in the twentieth century, the point being perhaps that nobody knows who Kilroy was, but he (she?) thought himself important enough to leave his mark. Indeed, who among us does not?

Kilroy is an old phenomenon. The last of the major step pyramids of Egypt is at Saqqara. It set the trend in design, today appearing as a high rectangular tower with a base engulfed in sand. A thousand years after it rose, someone scribbled on a wall of its mortuary temple that he had come "to see the beautiful temple of King Snefru," though we are not sure exactly who was buried there. The sight was glorious: "May heaven rain with fresh myrrh, may it drip with incense upon the roof of the temple..." Other graffiti festoon the pyramid. Greek mercenaries of 700 B.C. left their names on many Egyptian monuments.

Indeed, even the famous are not immune; Lord Byron's name is carved into the Temple of Poseidon at Cape Sounion. In the early 1800s a British traveler in Egypt incongruously named Giovanni Belzoni flamboyantly cut his appellation into many monuments, making himself well known to modern visitors by sheer irritating persistence.

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Though now disparaged by Egyptologists, he accomplished the aim of Kilroyism: sending at least his name across the abyss of years.

This simple, universal impulse gives us the most common type of deep time message. In nooks and crannies of once-great buildings, one finds the cut or carved or scrawled evidence of a desire to not go unheralded into oblivion: Kilroy lives.

The Kilroy impulse is both predictable and deplorable.

When I was working on the marker to fly with the *Cassini* Saturn probe, we learned that a Jet Propulsion Lab (JPL) group had begun to create their own marker. Previous missions all the way back to the Mars Viking lander, and perhaps even earlier, had carried the names of principal engineers, etched onto metal strips. Why not expand this idea and include the public?

With little time to spare, this Kilroy Was Here gesture could attract attention, public involvement, more hits at the *Cassini* web site. The Planetary Society joined in. Anyone who wanted their name to fly to Saturn had only to mail in a signed postcard. Signatures were cut out and scanned by the Planetary Society, then digitized and loaded onto a compact disk. After a national campaign roping in congressmen and canvassers, the grand result was 616,403 signatures on the carrier — named, in high bureaucratic style-deaf fashion, the Digitized Versatile Disk.

My congressman, Christopher Cox, sent all his constituents a letter promising to funnel their names through his office and onto the *Cassini* spacecraft: "Your name will live on in space long after your grandchildren, and theirs, and theirs." They obtained some celebrity signatures from *Star Trek* actors and congressmen, baby footprints and pet paw prints.

The European *Cassini* collaborators got wind of all this and started their own signature collection. They took the signature disk a step further and planned to sell a duplicate disk after the launch, reasoning that people who were to be immortalized on the interplanetary scale would, of course, want a copy. Like JPL, they set up a world wide web site to send names and messages. They got such memorable phrases as "Hello green worms," "HELP," and "Don't cry because you cannot see the sun, because the tears will stop you seeing the stars."

The Europeans never managed to get their hundred thousand signatures transmitted to JPL in time,

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so those are not on the Orbiter. Therefore the European Space Agency attached their own disk to the *Huygens* lander, while JPL's names fly on the Orbiter. The JPL team was uneasy about lack of screening of the ESA names and the Europeans' plans to sell their disk commercially.

All this activity to collect a meaningless string of names and salutations emulates the portion of the *Voyager* record of least value, the list of Congressional committee members that NASA forced the *Voyager* team to include. The compact disk surely will not survive for more than a century or so, nor could it be easily read in any distant future. Even very clever humans or aliens could not figure out the encoding software from first principles, and should they, they would get only a list of indecipherable, disorganized names, and a few cryptic, disconnected messages in this sea of words.

One could imagine a far future discoverer wondering what to think of a species that created a message without attempting to make it "comprehensible, self-extracting, anti-coded, triply redundant, and graduated in content," as Lomberg summed up the *Voyager* and diamond disk approach. As a projection of pure vanity it resembles the International Star Registry, which sells people certificates stating that stars have been named for them. Such meaningless exercises in ego tell more about our species than we might like revealed.

This Kilroy disk had every sign of a hastily designed public relations stunt. Including long lists of names is a cliché of time capsules. Apparently the largest collection was the twenty-two million assembled to be buried at the order of President Ford for the bicentennial celebration in 1976 (and then stolen, a classic irony). As one engineer put it to me, knowing that I looked askance at the signature disk, he and others devoted eighteen months of hard work to produce a "heart-based signature disk," in contrast to the "mind-based diamond."

Of course, both gestures spring from a common impulse: to give people a sense of connection with something larger than themselves. To value the "heart" is to rank the expressive quality of deep time messages over their communicating ability.

My trouble with all such name-gathering was that the end result more nearly resembled the graffiti which disfigure many ancient

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monuments. After all, the scribblers upon the Parthenon no doubt felt some burst of elation, too, but the end result besmirched the work that is the point of it all.

Artist Jon Lomberg, principal designer of the *Cassini* disk, regretted that the signature disk would get commingled in the public mind with the actual message marker, vastly increasing the ratio of noise to signal, as engineers put it. Indeed, the Planetary Society has now made this a feature of their membership drives; in 1997 they attached a microchip to the Stardust mission to rendezvous with a comet. "And you'll be a part of it all," an advertisement promised.

We can expect that such masses of names will become a standard fixture of a publicity-conscious space program. The Mars Polar Orbiter of 1999 will carry a signature disk, instead of the Visions of Mars disk crafted earlier. This decision came from a NASA lawyer's worries over sending any copyrighted material, despite permissions already obtained.

Shouting at the stars may become commonplace. In 1998 the Sci-Fi Channel tried to arrange transmission of signature messages by radio beamed skyward. An entrepreneur tried to sell space on metal plates to be launched to the stars. None seems to have even thought about how utterly distinct life forms could say something understandable to each other.

Also in 1998 a French artist announced plans to launch a satellite on a long orbit to return in fifty thousand years, bearing art and messages from our era. This "archaeological bird" will feature moving solar panels that will make it look like it is flying. With shape-remembering metal, it could carry sculpture, too.

More adventurously, a firm advertised in 1998 plans to launch into interstellar space human hairs, at $50 a go. They anticipated getting several million customers who could send a hair sample (their DNA) and some small message as well. Perhaps bald men would feel left out, though there is nothing in the advertising circular that excludes body hair.

A similar offer envisions broadcasting people's names into interstellar space by microwaves, a garbage SETI message perhaps to be beamed to the Andromeda galaxy. The hunger for Kilroy gestures seems unbounded.

I fear that our time may be known in the longest sense by our graffiti, strewn over the entire solar

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system, and perhaps among the stars.

Some of this column appears also in Dr. Benford's new book, *Deep Time*. Comments and objections to this column are welcome. Please send them to Gregory Benford, Physics Department, Univ. Calif., Irvine, CA 92717. Email: gbenford@uci.edu

COMING ATTRACTIONS

OUR COVER STORY for the May issue is a rousing sports tale from Robert Reed. Mid-way through the next century, a loophole in the new genetic engineering laws produces a select class of super athletes...all of whom are recruited aggressively by rival colleges. The machinations don't mean anything, however, until the super class gets out on the football field. When they do, the results turn into the "Game of the Century."

Also scheduled for next month is a lovely dark fantasy by Gary A. Braunbeck. "Small Song" is a meditative investigation into the origin of distant voices and into the nature of grief.

Looking ahead, we've got great new stories coming soon from R. Garcia y Robertson and Lewis Shiner, not to mention M. John Harrison, Gary Shockley, Albert Cowdrey, K. D. Wentworth, and a few players to be named later.

Meanwhile, the R.S.V.P.'s for our huge October anniversary issue keep coming in. We've already reserved some of the 320 pages for Jonathan Carroll, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Lucius Shepard's new novella "Crocodile Rock." Now Robert Silverberg has asked us to save a spot for his novelette "A Hero of the Empire," and we're gladly obliging. This issue's looking terrific—if you only read one magazine issue this year, think about reading more...but don't miss this one, whatever you do.

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Rob Chilson lives in Kansas City, Missouri. His most recent novel is Black as Blood *and he notes that his story "Acute Triangle" was recently adapted for the* Worlds of Paradox *series on cable television. This new sf story is set in the same well-conceived future as his May 1992 cover story "Far-Off Things," but you don't need to reread that tale to enjoy this speculation about what world gene-splicing might bring in the far future.*

The Hestwood

By Rob Chilson

How long, how long, in infinite pursuit
Of This and That endeavour and dispute?
Better be merry with the fruitful grape
Than sadden after none, or bitter, fruit.
— Omar/Fitzgerald

WENTING SONELLIAN SAT crosslegged before his croft, playing the zootibar. The haunting minor-key notes of the long bamboo flute wafted down to the beach and out over the Bay of Repose. To his right, Weary Water slipped soundlessly into the Bay. To his left, beyond the Bay to the west, the Ramping Sea lay sleeping. In the orchard behind his croft, Squatham, the birds were singing "Joy to the Morning" in massed chorus. The air was as warm as milk and as invigorating as wine.

And best of all, Calian dautNinnian, Wenty's current lover and future wife, was sleeping in his croft.

All was well on this best of all mornings in the sixty million years

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since man-kin first appeared upon the Prime Mondeign. The only discordant note in all the world was the bickering of the gulls on the beach. But Wenty was too happy to frown at that.

Then Calian dropped her scarf by him and trotted into the bay, startling the gulls, who cursed her. Splashing herself in a quick bath, she rinsed off the salt in Weary Water, tossed back her cascade of golden hair, and padded back. She seated herself before him. Her slanted black eyes with their vertically slit pupils were common here in the Hitherland but no less beautiful for that.

Wenty flung aside the zootibar and spread his arms, his gleaming red crest rising.

"Ah, my poppet, my pet, ha! You have had time to consider my proposal, eh?" Confidently he employed the Executant of inquiry that made a complete sentence of his Utterance. "So, you will be my wife and live forever with me at Squatham and fill my life with joy, eh?"

"No, heh." Smiling, she employed the Executant of response to inquiry.

"No, eh? No, eh?" Wenty's crest drooped. "You would turn down all this, eh?" waving his arms about to encompass the croft, the orchard behind, Weary Water and the beach, the milk-warm and wine-invigorating air and — and everything.

"Not you, huh," he said, turning his head to frown at the gulls raucously including themselves in that "everything."

"Think, Caly: you'd forfeit all these pleasures — and in addition the life-long pleasure of my conversation. Having enjoyed it life-long myself, I can tell you that it's a life-long pleasure indeed, ha! You would forfeit all this, for why, eh?"

Laughing, Calian said, "A great pleasure indeed. But I wish to see more of the Prime Mondeign before I settle down, huh," using the seldom-employed declarative Executant to indicate her seriousness. "I've told you before, but you do not believe I mean it. I've never been farther than Kirkilgowock, and you can see *that* from Skitty."

"This urge to travel — for why, eh? Even if you travel from now on, think how much there'll still be that you haven't seen. Life is too short, ha! And in the meantime you are missing precious days in my company."

She said, "Oh, Wenty, don't try to dissuade me. And I'll be missing

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none of your tongue, for you shall take me about. I want to see cities and mountains and statues and islands, and — and — "

"A city's what but a fat village, or an island but a clod surrounded by water, eh? You've seen Kirkilgowock, and you've been on a picnic to Ealeigh and Wesleigh," he said, indicating the low grassy islands of the Sea Gate that protected the Bay of Repose from the Ramping Sea.

"Two bits of meadow in the sea, that's all." She stood suddenly and passion entered her tones. "I've never even been to Iorkonon, ha! And Iorkonon — it's what, eh? Nothing but another modern seacoast trading center, heh! I've never seen a ruin of The Heights — not even a crumbling wall of High Material. I've never even seen an exozootic animal, whose ancestors came from the stars."

She flung her arms wide. "I want to see the Prime Mondeign, ha! Or at least a little bit of it. A cruise to the Farther Islands, perhaps."

Wenting had risen, and his crest rose too. "But what's left to see, when you've seen Squatham, eh?" He turned her about. "Look: the Heston Hills, and nearest of them Dun Bromgaw and Dun Ullock rearing, dark and portentous, ha! Not mountains, no; not even grand hills; but impressive for all that. And see, over them and spilling down from them, the dark, dangerous, and abysmal forest — the Hestwood, ha!"

Caly smiled tolerantly, tilting her head. "I've been in the woods. I only saw trees. I've even been in the Hestwood, on a picnic. We saw no dangers. No, no more arguments, ho!" Caly used the commanding Executant sharply. A flock of gorcrows passing overhead were startled into imitation: *kha! kha! kha!*

"Shut your beaks, ho!" she yelled up at them, tossing her hair, and turned back to Wenty. She tapped his chest. "Tonight, I sleep with Greling, whom I love also. And he has promised me, before we're wed, to take me at least to Iorkonon. Maybe there we'll take ship, if he saves enough. Even aerial ships sail to Iorkonon, ha!"

Aghast, Wenty said, "You'd sell yourself to your second-best lover for a mere pleasure trip, ha! But if you do not marry me, then who will damn my socks, eh?"

"Damn your socks, eh?" she cried, with a little shriek of laughter.

"Darn all euphemisms, ha!" he cried.

Still smiling and shaking her head, Calian picked up her scarf and

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knotted it carefully around her waist, leaving the trademark on her hip exposed: the image of an eo-oak leaf in black melanin under her skin. Wenty's was on his chest.

"No more arguments, Wenting, huh. If you really love me, you'll make an effort. Overcome your Hitherlands sloth, earn some money, and show me about a bit, ho." With a last kiss and wave, she set off across the low ridge that concealed Skitty to the west, her hips swinging attractively — and very firmly.

The voices of the gulls were harsher than ever, the air now flat and dull, and behind Squatham, the birds had broken up their devotional and were all squawking derisively at him.

"Chance damn it," Wenty said. "She has been talking this way for a long time, and now — What nonsense, ha! To go haring about like migrating birds but without their purpose, merely to gratify a whim for movement. Better to stay in some salubrious spot — Squatham comes to mind — and if one simply *must* move, then dance."

He sighed. "But how rare is the rational mind, ha! How sadly rare. At times I fancy myself quite alone."

He turned about and checked; his cat was digging a hole amid his flowers.

"Chance damn you, Socks, ha!" he cried. "There's a muckreed pond down by Weary Water."

"Too far, huh," grumbled Socks, squatting over the hole. Her expression became one of concentration and he knew further curses would be futile.

Stamping into his croft, he slammed the door behind him and stood uneasily looking about. Squatham was snugly built, if small; one room. He had glued together squared stones from some old building, brightened inside by yellow and white paint. The roof timbers were driftwood topped with hornstone shingles. There was a cooking, and in winter, heating stove in one wall, its firebrick gleaming dully. Also some shelves and wardrobes; a table, three stools, a bundle of bedding on a fold-down shelf. A few clothes, books and sheet music, Calian's spare tambangs, and the zootibar and titibuck Wenty played in their ensemble.

Now he looked at Squatham as Calian might.

Dull, he thought. "Where I see concentration on the task in hand —

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namely, enjoyment of life — she must see boredom. Most of all, we both see one thing: the same thing every day forever, amen, ha! But I can barely wait to start, where she feels trapped by it."

Shaking his head, he went back out, closed the door gently, and looked around. Squatham, seen from Caly's perspective, was even duller outside. The stones were their natural weathered dun color. Flowers grew about it and vines up on it. Back of it, beautiful and useful too, was his orchard.

"Socks, if she had not been hinting for so long about having not one, but *two* childen, both by the same father, I wonder if my love for her — Socks, eh? Yo, Socks! Off without a word, ha! Ignored and dishonored in my own house, ha. But it was ever thus with the great of soul, huh."

Disconsolately he wandered toward the orchard at the back of his fist of land. Socks put her head out from beneath a flowering bush and watched him go, her tongue protruding pinkly. Of her no doubt disdainful thoughts, she spoke no word.

Wenty had set out his now-thriving orchard when he first squatted by Weary Water. He had dairy trees yielding milk, cream, and cheese; eggs came from bushes under them. Sandwiches from the handmeal trees provided quick meals " — the singleton's salvation," he reflected. "Also the breadfruit."

The cereal nut bushes provided storable food — he had all three varieties, a total of twenty-two different kinds of nuts. There were numerous fruit trees, with thick-rinded apples, oranges, purples, and yellows, among others. Spud bushes provided all colors of starchy tubers, also in thick rinds, and densely packed leafy heads. "So many salads on the stem."

Of fruits that didn't store, he had a number of trees. One yielded red, blue, and white grapes. "And bunches of cherries," he added. "Soon it will be time to start the summer's run of our cherry wine, famed from here to Skitty." Another tree gave bunches of strawberries, blackberries, and so on. Four cloth trees marked his boundary to the west. Wooden spools of cotton and linen thread already grew on them, but they were too small to harvest the cheap bark cloth that he mainly wore.

"If I had planted aluminum-seed trees three years ago on that strip of clay soil, I might have a cash crop now," Wenty mused. "Or sea-silk seareeds on that bar just off Weary mouth."

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Glumly he examined his three tansy trees. "On the other hand," he said, brightening, "metal nuts delivered at Skitty have a negative value — worth nothing, less the cost of transport to Kirkilgowock. No, medicinals are the prime Chance, ha! Light in weight, and high in value."

The tansies — the name was derived from *athanatos* — had leaves edged and veined with crimson, with crimson trademarks underneath indicating the nuts each bore. These ranged from simple headache pills, through anesthetics, to powerful symbiotics proof against most transmissible diseases.

"Not much profit in headachers and soporifics," he said. "Anesthetics and symbiotics alone, then. Leave them in the shell, as longer lasting, and also as less work, ha!"

An hour or two later, carrying his shabby knapsack, he followed Calian's track over the ridge to Skitty. After a couple of miles he entered "bookland," where the land was platted into legally registered, taxed, and inheritable plots.

The village hummed with activity: a squatter from a southern fist led a placid Pontid pulling a wagon loaded with brew blooms and mushrooms. The squatter and his Pontid greeted him, and the latter waggled its comblike antlers. Men and women puttered in gardens. Children chased each other around the yard of the little school, unchanged since Wenting went. One man carried a crudely cast plastic jug of cooking fuel from the village's muckreed marsh.

Wenty paused at the yard of one of his elderly uncles. The uncle sat jawing with his wife about their disreputable roof.

"When it's a-rainin', you cain't fix it," Wenty said with a country twang, "and when it ain't a-rainin', it's as dry as any man's house."

His uncle agreed, laughing, and his wife said, "Long as it drips on *your* side of the bed, *I* don't care."

A small number of patrons sat under the tree in the innyard, where bulky old Peola sat in state and her patrons helped themselves to her wares, dropping small coins, "sparks," into a bowl.

Wenty greeted everyone by name, and stopped to speak to Ellian, his mother. It was half an hour past time for the ferry to depart when he reached the wharf. A small group of Skittles stood about, waiting for the ferryman.

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Slinging his knapsack behind his back, Wenty approached Greling, slapping the air with his palms, right-left, right-left. Greling's golden crest rose and they slap-sparred for several seconds with blinding speed but without touching each other. A game of great skill and restraint, though no longer played with knives.

"Thought you'd lost your touch by now, playing the zootibar out on Weary Water," said Grely as they caught their breath. "I see Caly's been talking to you," nodding at Wenty's knapsack.

"Yes, heh," said Wenty glumly. "Imagine my delight at being forced to labor like a landowner for the pleasure ha ha of absquatulating all over the Prime Mondeign."

Grely grinned. "Well, if you do acquire the necessary valuta, I'll still have the longer Father. I like the idea of seeing a few things before platting out and starting a family."

"A family of two children, she told you, eh?"

"Yes, heh. When neither of us picked up her hints she upped her offer. I'm taking carvings to Kirkilgowock — a manikin clock, and some windmills and toys and things. You, eh?"

"Medicinals, heh," said Wenty, secretly thinking that even Grely's best carvings would be an unsaleable drug on the market at Kirkilgowock. Fine hand work was common everywhere on the Prime Mondeign, because so little effort was needed to get food, clothing, or shelter.

"Hmm," said Grely. "Well — good luck, huh."

His dubiety was so obvious that Wenty had a qualm of doubt about his own choice. After all, medicines grew on trees.

The ferryman appeared and began shepherding his patrons onto the barge. "Rowing, eh?" he asked Wenty glumly.

"Of course, heh," Wenty said, paying half fare. They all did.

Wenting and Greling got seats side by side and the bowman pushed off. Standing melancholy at the steering oar, the ferryman forlornly called the beat, and Wenty glanced over his shoulder to take the distance. Kirkilgowock's silvery hornstone roofs shimmered two miles away across the Bay of Repose.

"Mind you, it may be none too safe to travel," Wenty said, heaving at the oar. "You think the Midlanders will make war on the Mudfeet, eh? That would involve the Sons of Infamy."

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The Hitherland was settled in the aftermath of the Octurian Wars by a shock corps called the Sons of Infamy — their ancestors. The Wars had raged across the area for an octury, an octron of years.*

Grely dropped his oar into the water. "The last time the Midlanders came against the Sons of Infamy, old delirious Delious lost his Swarthog regiment, his arm, and his baton. He said, quote, The Sons of Infamy are not peaceable; they're just lazy."

They rowed two strokes thoughtfully. "For a fact, we're lazy enough," Wenty admitted. "And peaceable. I doubt there's a tetron of weapons in Skitty — and we live not so far from the Hestwood."

"Still, when the Farther Islands call for help against pirates, they call most on whom, eh?" Grely said. "We're dangerous enough still — just lazy, huh."

"Sons of Sloth rather than Infamy, ha."

"Ho, Gaffer," Grely said to the old man behind Wenty. "Pull your oar in — we can hear you breathe all over the boat. Wenty will pull for you."

"Glad to, Gaffer Swanthold," said Wenty, and put his back into it. The wheezing and gasping behind faded.

"Thank 'ee, lads, thank 'ee."

"You'll show us what, eh, at the next meeting of the Banana Literary Society," Grely asked Wenty.

"I've been working on a six-line rispetto, a mere trifle, heh," Wenty said. "The rhyme scheme is one-two, one-two implied, followed by a couplet, three-three stated."

Implied rhyme was discovered by a Cenozoic girl whose foot had gone to sleep. She cried a couplet in anapaestic monometer with implied rhyme:

> "There are stars
> In my shoe."

This seminal poem is flawed, in that it is not comprehensible without explication of the situation, and the rhymes, *twinkling* and *tingling*, are not perfect. But the technique was noted, and eventually bore fruit.

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*256 — 2 to the 8th power

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"Let's hear your rispetto, then," said Grely.
Wenty delivered his lines between oar-strokes:

"Born as urgent in the Sun as bright-faced flowers,
"Striving as if work would bend inflexible Fate,
"Yet we dimly see our ends in Future's haze;
"All our effort speeds the grave and — blankness beyond.

"Why then spend our only lives in fasting?
"Neither Love, nor Life, is everlasting."

Omitted Executants — "single-talk" — was much used by poets and philosophers, as it made the work ambiguous.

Grely glanced over at him. "A hackneyed theme, but a good one. Let's see, your rhymes — flowers imply blooming — and that rhymes with the third line's 'looming' through a haze. Hmm. 'Fate' and 'blankness beyond' — void — naught — rhymes with 'lot' which means Fate. Blooming, lot, looming, naught, fasting, everlasting. Not bad, though far from great."

That was Wenty's assessment. "And you're working on what, eh?"

"A couple of elegiac stanzas with double rhyme, stated and implied, heh. The implied scheme is three, three, four, three. I only have the first stanza finished. More or less finished, ha." Taking a breath, he said to the rhythm of their strokes:

"We come to Life with tongues like brooks a-babble;
"Knowing naught of Whence, much though we've dinned,
"Though of Why we're here some will gibble-gabble:
"But one in the end with the ignorant wind."

"Not bad," Wenty said, trying to work out the implied rhymes. Lines one, two, and four rhymed, and brooks babbling had to be flowing. "A hackneyed theme also, but also a good one, and double rhyme is merely a trick. However — not bad at all."

"Oh, I'm like you, never wanted to astound the world; just to amuse my own easily amused self."

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Wenty gave him a quick backhand to the chest. "Speak for yourself, poltroon, ha!"

Grely almost caught a crab, laughing.

"I think your rhyme on the second line is too obscure, though," Wenty said. He hadn't got it.

Sobering, Grely said, "That's one of the reasons I haven't finished the second stanza. Double rhyme is tough."

Presently they pulled into the mouth of the Silking River and docked at Kirkilgowock. Wenty fetched a gourd of water from the public fountain for Gaffer Swanthold

Wenty and Grely stood regarding Kirkilgowock. It was the largest, and only, city either had seen. A dodektron of man-kin congregated here — two to the twelfth power, or 4,096 in the forgotten decimals of the Cenozoic. On market days, half again, or even twice as many, thronged the streets. Common folk such as themselves were found here; water-breathing Marineers from the Mondalorn or "World-Waste" Ocean beyond the Farther Islands; fur-bearing sylvandros with four legs; and hulking ogres from the Tolland Plateau far up Silking River.

"And she wants to see Iorkonon at least, and maybe even Koshkonong on the Farther Islands, ha," muttered Wenty.

"'Ouch, ha!' cries the sufferer," Grely said. He grinned and slapped Wenty's shoulder. "Good luck, ha!" He made off for the market squares.

When Wenty had been to "all both" apothecaries and the fly market and counted his meager earnings, he disconsolantly sought the smaller market square. There he saw Grely's gold-gleaming crest bending low. Despite himself, he felt a throb of relief, even pleasure, at his rival's expression. Wryly he noted similar expressions on Grely's face when the other descried him.

"You need anesthetics, eh?" Wenty asked him ironically.

"Better, a big drink, heh. And *you* would like to buy a manikin clock that chimes the hours with fantastic capers, eh?"

"I mean to live my life in such a way as never to need a clock, let alone a noisy one, heh," said Wenty. They slapped each other and parted.

A gloomy cloud threatened the Bay of Repose, but it only broke over Wenty when he saw Calian. So soon as she learned that he had

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done poorly at Kirkilgowock, she professed great interest in Greling's fortune.

"He's *such* a good carver — he made our windmill, you know."

Wenty slap-sparred her cheeks, his palms fanning her hair gently; she didn't blink or abate a jot of her dazzling smile. "You are a heartless, trifling, titivating tabby," he told her severely. "And you may call that a farewell, ha."

Still she smiled, and followed him to the door. "Don't forget, I come to you in three nights," she called. "The night after you see Harlian. See that the sheets are clean, ho!"

Her mother Ninnian put her head out of the parlor window and called, "If you tire of her, Wenty dear, look me up, ha!"

"I'll do that," Wenty called back. "You at least are an honest tabby."

"Good night, Wenty, hurry for the storm. Love you, ha!" Caly cried.

"You can do what, when the woman loves you, eh?" he asked himself, hurrying before the storm. "Naught, that's what, heh."

NEXT MORNING he awoke to find Socks on his chest, peering enigmatically into his face. His breath came with effort; she was as long as his arm from elbow to fingertip, not counting tail.

"Give me food, ho," she said immediately he opened his eyes.

"Food, oh," he said automatically, the Executant of response to command. Fog, the aftermath of the storm, darkened the windows.

"A beautiful day, a salubrious day, a day for savoring," he said, opening the door and peering out. He saw fog, and let some in, cold, wet, and raw.

"Close the door, ho," said Socks. She leaped to her favorite shelf and shook her paw disdainfully.

"Of all the animals on the Prime Mondeign, only cats dare give orders to man-kin, huh," Wenty said. "But cats know no lord."

He bowed elaborately, too close to her, and received a box on the cheek that was no slap-spar. "Ouch, ha. There are times when you remind me of another woman, huh."

He set out food for her and hung up his bedding to air. Taking a battered aluminum saucepan, he made an omelette of eggs, cream, cheese,

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chopped vegetables, and the treemeat and peppery red pods of the jerky-pod. He whistled and sang as he worked, aggravating Socks, already irritated by the weather.

He made enough omelette for both of them, and shared with her. "Now," he said when he was finished, tapping her to get her attention. "We have a problem — to make money."

Picking up the last mouthful of omelette, Socks carried it across the room and crouched with her back to him. Picking up his tea-cup, Wenty followed her and squatted nearby.

"Now," he said, tapping her again. "This means of acquiring money, while preferably legal, must be other than, and faster than, the slow effect of honest toil."

Socks took the remainder of the omelette beneath the table, but Wenty stretched out on his elbow, head under it: "So, we must simply *find* the money or other valuta."

Socks flounced out from under the table, abandoning the last morsel, and sprang onto her shelf. Wenty stood and opened his mouth, but she hissed at him, ears back.

"Be silent, ho!" she cried. "Go away, ho!"

"Silent, eh? You would have me burst, eh? I cannot be silent and live, ha!"

"You always talk, ha! You always make noise, ha! You are always near me, ha! You make so much noise, for why, eh? For no reason, heh!"

Wenty stepped back against the table and struck an attitude with one hand held out.

"O Cat," he said, "damned Cat, who with specious sagacity speaking, mocks a man-kin's chat, with haughty reprobations squeaking."

He approached the hand to her nose, waited while she spat at him and looked angrily away, then swooped on her, rolled her over, and dug his fingers into her large furry tummy. Instantly she whipped her paws onto his hand and dug in, bending her neck to bite as well, and a bloody tussle ensued.

A watery golden beam of light struck through the window and they broke off.

"A better day dawns at last, ha," Wenty said. "Now you can go out without wetting your paws. You can go down to the muckreed marsh, huh."

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She reluctantly released his hand. "Too far, huh."

Wenty broke an alcohol-bearing nut from his muckreeds and bathed the wounds on his hand, gasping at the pain.

"So it would seem," he said over his shoulder, "that our best chance lies with the old tales of treasure to be found in the Hestwood — eh? Gone, eh? O faithless cat, ha! But when did I ever need a cat, eh, or indeed any audience."

He donned winter pantaloons, long-sleeved shirt, and ankle boots, packed his knapsack with food and a waterproof, slung a short-handled shovel. There was a stubborn look to the haze in the northwest when he stepped out, suggesting they weren't done with weather yet.

"To the southeast, past the orchard, lie the Heston Hills, covered with the dark-needled, ominous Hestwood. Alas, that great city."

A now-nameless city of the Heights of Mankind had rolled over the horizon there not less than a tetro-myrion of years ago.* For it was reckoned that the Fall from the Heights had occurred so long ago.

"And alas, Heston, ha! How are the mighty in turn fallen."

After the Fall, a mighty city had arisen on the High city's ruins, falling in its turn many generations ago. The name of that city was unknown, but it was now called Heston, because it was assumed to have been the capital of all the country round. Heston itself had since been mined out.

"Now only the forest keeps its secrets."

Wenty stood hesitating.

"So small a Chance, ha! And yet, I have what other Chance, eh? To draw the Long Father requires an ante, but to draw the Short Father, none." Toss-sticks was played with three lengths of sticks. "I shall be back late, if indeed I make it back by tonight. Our ensemble meets tonight. Ah well, Harlian also plays zootibar. And she at least will miss me, if Calian does not."

Launching his canoe on Weary Water, he paddled with the tide, making good time. The river swung in a great arc around the Hestwood to his left. On his right was a milder, mostly deciduous forest, interspersed with meadows. Fistland, sparsely occupied by squatters. Civilization was returning gradually to the Hitherland, after the Octurian Wars.

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*16 myrions, or over a million. Myrion = 65,536

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"But no one squats him in the Hestwood," he added ominously.

Nearest of the Heston Hills were Dun Bromgaw and Dun Ullock, from between which came the Hestwater. It too was tidewater, and the tide took him up to the very foot of Dun Bromgaw. He tied up and climbed the hill, staying alert for valuta. High Mondeign cities were rich in iron, copper, even lead, all of which were mined by the appropriate trees.

"Also, and more important," he added with enthusiasm, "High cities are sources of nonTabular elements, ha!" These were elements not found in nature: scarlet coronium, purple imperex, noble copper, starsilver, among metals; galatium, vionium, and so on, among nonmetals. "Galatium in particular," he said, looking keenly about for bushes with blue-veined leaves. Galatia buds were extremely valuable as perfume sources.

"Yet, what do I mostly see, eh? Firks, heh," sadly.

He paused on the top and wiped his brow. The forest stood silently regarding him in the heat of the day.

A rich gloom as of an ancient cathedral hung over him. The glow diffusing between needle and needle above filled all the forest with a faint green mist of light, struck back sharply from the bright green of the moss that covered the soil without a break. Drifts of last year's dead needles made a brown candlewick pattern on the moss. Down the slopes marched the dark-stemmed ranks of trees, solemn, mysterious, haunted by thoughts no human could think.

Wenty cleared his throat. "And no sign of valuta, huh."

The city of Heston, whatever its name, had mined these hills for octuries. He hesitated, then descended to the Hestwater again. This stream, running between the hills, had dug more than he could in a lifetime. He fell to examining the banks and bed of the stream. All he found amid the rounded stones were occasional odd bits of fractured glassy High material. Jewelers sometimes carved these things into imitation gems, but they were harder to work than real gems and less flashy. Other bits of High material were opaque; dull white or gray.

The bushes along the stream were ordinary. No galatias here. Nothing, nothing, nothing.

"The trees of generations of miners have drained all valuta from this soil, huh," he said glumly.

The rest of the day he followed the Hestwater far into the Heston

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Hills. A dark shadow fell over him. Startled, he looked up. Night had fallen, but he had not noticed, for the overcast sky directly above him still glowed in a broad circle.

"The long-gone streets of the High city still are lit," he said in awe. He'd seen this glow on the Hestwood from a distance, but had never stood in it, visiting only by day.

Far out in orbit about the Prime Mondeign a celestial lumer had turned its insubstantial, sun-catching mirror toward the site of the Hestwood. The lumers remained faithful to their last commands long after the cities they sought to illuminate were darkened by time beyond any power to brighten.

"And now the lights of the Heights are occulted by the bitter clouds of these unhappy days," he observed.

A rank of black clouds was blowing between him and the glowing sky. Even as Wenty looked hurriedly around for a suitable camping place, darkness came down like the lid of a blackened pot.

Except — "This is what, eh?" he murmured. To the east and south, a faint glow of greenish light was visible. Wenty groped cautiously through the darkened forest.

The glow grew, permeating a section of forest, as if a lighthouse beam from behind made every leaf glow greenly. No fyrhs these. Wenty stared. He was looking at a lambent forest of festival trees.

Every leaf glowed green, giving the forest its prevailing tone. But the verdant light was spangled and made festive with twinkling bright reds, yellows, oranges, whites, and blues. These lights came from glowing fruits, flowers, and candies dangling from under the limbs. Also dangled wooden toys and fantastic ornaments — stars and horns and human heads and many others.

"An enchanted forest, indeed, ha," he breathed.

Wenty had seen noctilucent trees before. But he had never seen — or dreamed of! — a *forest* of festival trees.

Wondering, he climbed one of them, up through a world of shivering light, till he looked down on the rainbow-spangled pool of glowing emerald that filled a hollow in the dark hills. West rose the mothwing shoulders of the hills, crowned with the distant flicker of the oncoming storm. East still was lit, but the shadow swept over it even as he watched.

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"High cities were large as counties," he murmured. "It must be true that their inhabitants were Lucifexes, and flew, huh."

Looking down, Wenty saw a dark blotch in the middle of the festival forest. Descending, he wandered bemused in a land of delights. His mother Ellian used to buy small festival trees as centerpieces for Wenty's birthday parties. He'd only seen one big one, the Municipal Tree in Kirkilgowock, and it would have seemed small here tonight.

The blotch was, he discovered, the foundation-hole of a considerable building, so old it was nearly filled in, overgrown with ordinary eo-oaks and fyrhs. Here and there stood a section of crumbling stone wall. He pondered this ruin. The Octurian Wars had ended an octury ago.

"Someone, famous long ago, planted hedges of lucent trees to light the grounds of his manse on cloudy nights," he said. "The trees remain though the manse be gone. And no doubt there once were lawns and pleasaunces and game courts, all swallowed now by the festival forest. Famous times they must have had in the evenings, with the celestial lumer above and the festival trees glowing all about."

More importantly, here was a scrap of shelter. Hastily he gathered armloads of dead wood, wandering dreamlike under the glowing trees, and built a fire on the east side of a bit of wall. Mouth watering, he took a handmeal out of his knapsack and began to strip the husks back.

Motion in the green glowing aisles of the festival forest caught his eye and he paused. A thing stepped out and confronted him, a green-litten chiaroscuro of umber and somber shapes and angles. Some weird thrashing machine, it might have been, or a mangle, or a nameless collection of mechanical oddments on the march.

No: not nameless. "Killoon," he breathed, staring.

It looked a little like a giant scorpion, two rows of jointed legs, a complicated double head, and four crooked arms with rows of lobster-claws instead of fingers. The top part of the head was circled with dark, motionless, gem-like eyes; nocturnal, it could see in the dark. Brown it was, and dark, and deadly, and its ancestors came not from the wholesome Earth of the Prime Mondeign, but from some wild far star beyond all kenning.

"You are whom, eh?" it asked, its voice a rasping rattling tooth-grinding sound without a trace of breath in it. It was made, he saw faintly,

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by the rapid chittering and chattering of many tiny maxillae above the complex mouth in its chest.

Clearing his throat, he said, "I am Wenting, heh."

It had a spear level in one "hand" on each side, and kept moving them mechanically toward and away from him. Now it paused in this movement, to regard him with what might have been dubiety.

Pause, then the rasp: "You where going — going where — you — "

It stopped, and rattled something that sounded like angry words, words Wenty had never heard. Confidently he waited for their meanings to well up from within him, but no meanings came. He stared in amazement. Always before, the meanings had come; every root word of Tellucent was latent in his germ-plasm. He had only to hear them to know them.

The killoon spoke with the seeming of great care: "You — going — where — eh?"

In a sudden illuminating flash Wenty realized that the alien thing *spoke another language*, a language its ancestors had brought from the stars. Having no instinctive grasp of Tellucent, it had made a simple error on his name.

But it was waiting for an answer, pantomiming throwing its spears at him and at him, at him and at him. And this was a killoon, terrible beings who had savagely earned their name.

"I am not Going, heh," he said. "I am Wenting, heh." Sweating in the heat of the night, he waited. Lightning flashed, muted thunder spoke.

The spears paused again in their incessant motion. "Your name is what. Eh? Eh?"

Wenty stared. After all, he thought, if I am qualified to confuse a cat that also has Tellucent by instinct, can I not confound this alien creature? Again he must clear his throat. "My name is What, heh."

The killoon reared backward in some strong, fretful emotion. It began to jab the spears irritatedly at the ground, and their rhythm was broken, jagged. "That is what I asked, ha! Your — name — is — what — eh?"

"I am Wenting, heh," he said, throat dry. "My father is Gone, huh."

It lifted its left front foot and doubled it into a fist, slammed it down into the straggly grass with a thud. Then it similarly stomped the foot behind that, and the one behind that, and so on back, then the back foot on the right side and so forward.

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"You — are — going — how — much — farther — eh?" it demanded harshly, continuing to ripple its stomping.

"I am What; you are Whom, heh. 'Who' is you, eh?"

Wenty's hearts were shaking his chest, one-un, two-oo, but his plan seemed to be working. The killoon went from rippling a stomp to dancing sidlingly about, stomping irregularly.

"I am not 'Who,' heh! Ha! You am not — not are What, heh! You all confuse, ha! You not know own language, ha! I ask the name of your name, ha! You say nonsenses, ha! Now I asks you going where — you — you where — what you — who — "

It jabbed one spear into the ground and left it there, dancing about and snapping its pincers like castanets.

Wenty leaned forward and aggravated it further: "You talk confusedly, ha! You ask two questions at once, ha! And you don't listen to answers, ha! My name is What, ha! I am Wenting, ha!"

The killoon's verbal frustration abruptly became too much for it. Leaving its spear sticking in the sod, it gave a loud rasping *Raa-aa-aa-aawk!* This furious cry trailed back between the coldly glowing trees in a comet-tail of sound, as it rushed off into the night.

Wenty took a long deep breath.

"I am going to have to sit up all night and watch for it, eh?" he asked himself uneasily.

But then from the east he heard the wailing, roaring cry of a killoon on the hunt. The odds were against its returning.

Still, he slept poorly that night. All through his uneasy dreams, the festival forest glowed, green and spangled with eyes, regarding him through the rain that rattled on his waterproof.

NEXT MORNING, Wenty rose stiffly in the chilly predawn and munched dried fruit and a couple of handmeals. His gaze kept jerking perkily about. But nothing moved except the drip of water.

Packed, Wenty hesitated. But this old manse must have been looted many times.

The killoon's spear.

He pulled it out and looked at it. Crudely wrapped to a crude haft was

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a gleaming scarlet point of hammered coronium.

"Coronium, ha!" The first he'd ever seen, but unmistakable. "It came whence, eh?" Wenty hefted it, estimated it as worth a dozen gold stars.

He climbed a tree. Reflexively he looked at the sky to the west; the weather was over. To the east he looked anxiously and saw no sign of the killoon. "Naturally," he told himself grumpily.

Instead he saw blotches of light green amid the evergreen Hestwood. There must once have been a considerable community here, lost now to history and all memory. A community that, perhaps, had left trees still growing in coronium rich soil?

Descending, Wenty turned his steps east. Presently he found an old road — a tunnel through Hestwood. At the far end of it, the rising Sun winked at him. To right and left was a suggestion of cut stone; fences, he thought. Within an hour he saw an indubitable gate and turned in.

The sunlight lanced in over the hills, pitilessly revealing a filled and overgrown hole, utterly mundane. Around were only fyrhs, eo-oaks, and festival trees, wan by daylight.

"Alas, the tabby is impatient, as tabbies always are, and wants her nuptial trip soon," Wenty said glumly.

He went back to the road, hesitated, and pushed on east for a space. He passed several gates, investigated a couple more ruins.

"Face it, the spearpoint maybe never came from here at all. And if I spend much more time searching," Wenty added uneasily, "I'll find myself benighted again in grounds hunted by the killoon."

Aimlessly he wandered around the grounds of the last ruin. A very substantial place, this, with a huge outer wall. More like a castle, but too big to defend. Possibly the central fort of the forgotten city.

He paused. There was a suspicion of order in the huge mossy eo-oaks. They seemed to have been set in rows.

"One would plant an orchard of eo-oaks, for why, eh?"

But eo-oaks don't have trademarks on the undersides of their leaves. Wenty's face went pale; blood roared in his ears; his knees shook and almost gave way beneath him. It was an orchard of adama trees.

Wenty came near to fainting. His next coherent thought was, "How lovely they are, huh." He was looking at goldflakes growing on the massive bole against which he was leaning.

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He had not dreamed the orchard. Swelling egg-shaped nodules in the bark grew along the underside of every large limb. Many of these nuts were bigger than his fist.

Numbly, he tottered over to a fallen limb. With hysterical steadiness he cut into the largest nut with the spearpoint. Damp and rotten, it yielded readily and a smooth plum-shaped stone fell out, big as the last joint of his thumb. Wenty held it up to the light. It was a deep transparent blue that smashed a sunbeam into glancing fragments.

Sapphire.

Awed, he looked around. Tetrons, sixteens, of adamas. Ancient adamas. They yielded sapphires and rubies and the transparent adamants. It took a lifetime to grow a single gem the size of this one; generations to grow the big ones. The ground here must be littered with wealth. Bemused, speechless, he wandered through the orchard, poking at the soil.

One row was different. He puzzled numbly over its trademarks. "Smaragdos, ha!" Rare jewel trees, yielding emeralds, aquamarines, and beryls. Few soils had the constituents of their gems. Their limbs were studded with nuts.

The two outer rows of the orchard were quartzite trees, which yielded all the semi-precious stones based on quartz.

"No matter. There's enough wealth in the center."

Wenty's hearts were racing. He wanted to leap madly on every fallen limb, dig crazily with the spear, see the red and blue and green and clear and rose-colored stones pour into his palm.

He counted them: sixteen rows, originally of sixteen trees each, not counting the quartzites. No wonder the massive wall about this orchard. The thought of all the wealth and beauty here made him want to shout.

He pictured Caly's face when he presented her with a knapsack of gems of every kind. Her ecstatic delight in them, and joy in him. The journey they would take, to remember the rest of their lives.

Then he pictured Greling's expression. But before he could feel sorry for his friend's disappointment, Grely's expression changed, became determined. He pictured Grely also presenting Caly with a sack of gems, and her delighted confusion over having to choose.

And not just Greling, but all Skitty, rushing to the orchard. And not

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just Skitty, but all Kirkilgowock. And not just Kirkilgowock, but all the coast of Hitherland would swarm to the orchard.

They'd cut up all the fallen limbs, and kick aside the leaves, and dig up the soil. They'd climb the trees and cut into the larger nuts, then the middle-sized and small ones, mad for wealth. They'd squabble over the limbs, and scuffle over the holes they'd dig. They'd squat in the orchard and claim the trees.

They'd fight each other to squat and claim.

They'd kill each other.

"All for what, eh? Wealth, eh? — All this ridiculous wealth, beyond all reason — avarice has no use for it."

And Calian — proffered all this. What would it do to her?

"It would destroy her, heh," he answered, horror-struck. She would change from the open, generous, warm-hearted woman he loved into a grasping, selfish, compliment-seeking, wealth-hoarding termagant.

That was bad enough, but the horrors contined: "And me, eh?" he asked. "I am better than they of the coast of Hitherland, eh? Better than my neighbors of Kirkilgowock, eh? Better than my friends and relatives of Skitty, eh?"

No, no, and no; he drew the Short Father on every question. "At bottom we are all Sons of Infamy."

He had dropped the sapphire. Wenty looked at his trembling fingers, wiped them on his pantaloons. He wished he had not eaten so much breakfast. He wished he had not eaten breakfast at all — wished he had some cold clear water to drink, now!

In school they had taught him a charming myth about the Fall from The Heights. The Lord of the Abyss had tempted Anthroman to invade the forbidden Fields of the Sun. For his presumption, his wings were burned off and he fell to destruction on the glowing Fields. And ever after, the man-kin had been forced to walk and labor for their food.

He found himself leaning against a huge tree, wiping his eyes and gulping. It will be all right, he thought. But I'd better get back to the Hestwater soon.

He looked around. In his sickness he had stumbled downhill. This was the last of the jewel trees. An adama, he saw, and the biggest of all; the drainage of the slope favored it. Yet it seemed to have no nuts. No, there

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was one, a small one. And there, a smaller one. But that was all. There was a big dead limb, very old and crumbling. He kicked it and it fell into moist powder. Out of the powder fell a golden stone.

Wenty stared at it for a long time, then breathlessly bent and picked it up. He couldn't quite close his fingers around it.

"Auron."

It was the color of transparent gold, a beauty that made him want to weep. The rarest and most valuable gem on the Prime Mondeign.

"Because vionium is a nonTabular element," he told himself gravely. "Very rare." The auros tree was an adama that colored its adamant with vionium salts.

In his shock Wenty hadn't consciously heard anything, but was not surprised to find the killoon behind him. It took the auron from his fingers, held it up.

A golden beam fell on its upper head. It was wearing a thing like a crown around it. This crown was made of linked flat plates of smoked plastic, to shield its nocturnal eyes from the light of day.

"Pretty," it said in its rasping voice. "But of no value." It tossed the auron aside, dismissively.

It tilted its upper head and he felt its regard on him through the smoked plastic. In a prescient flash, Wenty felt that it was debating opening the subject of his name and destination.

It didn't. "Man-kin will swarm in and trample all over the forest, eh?" It held a skin sack full of water, and no weapons.

After a moment Wenty said, "No, heh. I will go back there," pointing with the spear to the north, "and I will not come back."

It rattled something killoonish, then said, "That is good, huh." It started off, swinging its sack.

"I have your spear, huh," Wenty called. "You left it last night, huh. Here, take it, ho." He proffered it.

After some hesitation it accepted it. "It is mine again, eh?"

"Yes, heh. Beautiful and useful both."

"Very useful, huh." For a moment it regarded him through smoked plastic, still, he felt, brooding on the subject of his name. Instead it turned about and made off, soon vanishing in the green and gold of the morning forest.

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The auron gleamed amid the leaves.

With me along the strip of Herbage strown
That just divides the desert from the sown,
Where the name of Slave and Sultan is forgot —
And pity Sultan Mahmud on his golden throne!
— Omar/Fitzgerald

ONE OF SOCKS'S remote descendants attacked Wenting's large knobby bare foot. He reached over with the other foot and bapped it on the head. The kitten looked up at him wide-eyed. "Mew?" it said, its eyes being open but not its mouth.

"They'll be talking back to you soon enough," said Greling.

"Soon enough," Wenty said.

A beautiful naked young woman ran by them, laughing, and into the Bay of Repose. For a moment, Wenty's hearts hesitated, then beat again. In that moment he had traveled years into the past...he remembered Calian running by him down to the beach for a swim and a wash, on many mornings, many many mornings ago, when he and all the world were young. This was one of her granddaughters.

"Ouch, ha," said Grely, wincing. Another of Socks's descendants climbed his leg, catstep *wince*, catstep *wince*, catstep *wince*. The kitten sat staring on his knee. "Mew?"

Grely glared, and bent its ear backward. "Mew you, ha!"

It shook its head, arighting the ear, and continued to stare at him.

Wenty looked fondly at his old friend. Grely's hair was thin now, even his crest, and that was silver. His own was thicker, but just as pale and lank. Both their faces were nut-brown. They had aged well, Wenty thought complacently. When they were young, he and Grely looked much like those handsome athletic fellows down there in the Bay, being teased by the tabbies with their long red or golden hair.

But now he and his friend looked like nobody else on the Prime Mondeign. Gnarled and crabbed, but individual, distinctive, original.

"Poets age well," Wenty said.

"Poets and musicians," said Grely, rubbing the kitten's head. "You

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remember the days of our old ensemble, eh? You used to be fair with the zootibar; pity you didn't keep it up."

"I haven't even played the Devotionals for three years; not since — " — Caly's death still unspeakable.

After a bit, Grely said, "You know, it was the greatest stroke of luck in my life, when you found that auron in the Silking River."

That was the story he'd put about. Wenty knew of at least seven auronic expeditions up the Silking, one even up onto the plateau of the Tolland.

"That was luck for me, but for you, eh?"

"Oh, yes, heh. It got for me the best wife a man could have. Harlian consented to be mine the same year you and Caly took your trip to the Farther Islands, you remember."

Wenty could barely remember what he'd seen on that trip, though Caly's perpetually surprised and joyful expression would be with him till he died. She had never lost it, in all the years of their marriage. Smiling at his own memories, he looked down at the beach, where a vigorous white-haired Harly stirred the pot of sea-food and tubers and shouted spiritedly at the romping youths in the reposeful bay.

Two kittens pounced on his feet, and he scuffled with them.

"Some things never change, thank the Long Father," he said.

Very little change had come to the Bay of Repose in his lifetime. Squatham behind him was platted now, to be left to his youngest grandson. It was no longer a croft, but a respectable dwelling of five rooms. His oldest son had platted the land just west of the knoll that concealed Skitty from Squatham; another son lived across the Bay.

Caly had found she loved motherhood, and almost alone among the women he knew, had borne a third child. Much as she loved her two sons, her daughter Ylian had become the light of her life, and Wenty's.

Grely had been following his thoughts. "You've become silent; you always used to talk. But there've been no other changes so major, aside from our age. We've been blessed indeed by the Long Father."

More than you know, Wenty thought. We Sons of Infamy were tempted, in my person, and did not Fall. So there were a couple of plats this side of Skitty, a few more fists squatted on to the south. But few were the adventurers who prowled the Heston Hills; the Hestwood slept alone.

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Wenty quirked a smile at a random thought. Far to the east, at the end of the Bay, was a small complacent village: Fyn. Into Fyn, in broad daylight, a killoon had wandered, years ago. It wore a crown of smoked plastic lenses and carried a bag of copper nuggets from a copperseed tree. It had exchanged them for scissors, needles, thread, and ornamental buttons.

"How wise cats seem," said Grely, following his own thoughts. "How wise, and how secretive."

"Yes."

Generations might well pass before that deadly orchard was discovered again...so, let them pass in peace!

Often, in dreams, Wenty found himself there, and the trees now dangled gems like festival tree ornaments, and they sparkled all over the ground in the light of the glowing leaves. Always again in his dreams he was stunned by the wealth, but more by the beauty.

Often he had yearned to tell someone his wonderful secret. But he had told not even Caly. He would never tell.

He did not talk, he thought, in his sleep; and nowadays he slept alone, but for the cats. It is true cats know no lord. But cats never talk. However much they say, they never talk.

"Soup is served, ha!" Harly cried.

Wenty arose with alacrity, displacing kittens. "Come, ha! My appetite, at least, is as youthful as ever."

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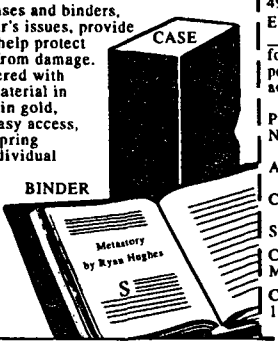

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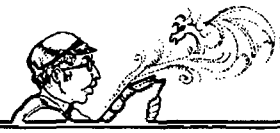

CURIOSITIES

KATER MURR BY E.T.A. HOFFMANN

THE TALES of E. T. A. Hoffmann, nightmares that grow like virulent, exotic plants beneath the reader's gaze, are fairly well known by fantasy enthusiasts. Less well known than the tales is Hoffmann's novel, *Kater Murr.*

This complex, truly wild fiction, created in the mid-1800s, is the autobiography of the tomcat Murr, written on the backs of the pages of a manuscript he has clawed to pieces. Interspersed with Murr's musings is the biography of Kappelmeister, Johannes Kreisler, Murr's owner. As the fragments of the cat's story proceed in a linear fashion, those representing Kreisler's are arranged in reverse order, creating a weird, schizophrenic text.

We follow the development of Murr from kittenhood to self-proclaimed cat genius. Throughout, he shamelessly promotes his ponderous philosophy and hysterically bad poetry, musing on the superiority of cats to humans. Alternating with these sections are the fragments of the life of Kreisler, a composer and musician, suffering bouts of self-doubt, paranoia, and true artistic genius. Kreisler is involved, through the shadowy, magus character of Meister Abraham, in Court intrigue and fantastic, dark doings that the reader is ever on the verge of understanding yet never really gets to the bottom of.

Hoffmann, the product of a broken home, an unloved and unappreciated child prodigy, admitted to hearing the devil's voice in his head when he was a youth. Other voices, personalities within personalities, the theme of the double, dominate his amazing creative output in music, painting and writing. Kreisler was the pseudonym under which Hoffmann published his brilliant critical essays on music, and Murr was the real name of his cat. Through these two entities, he pieced together the fragments of his own shattered psyche and commented on the relationship of art and artists to society.

—Jeffrey Ford

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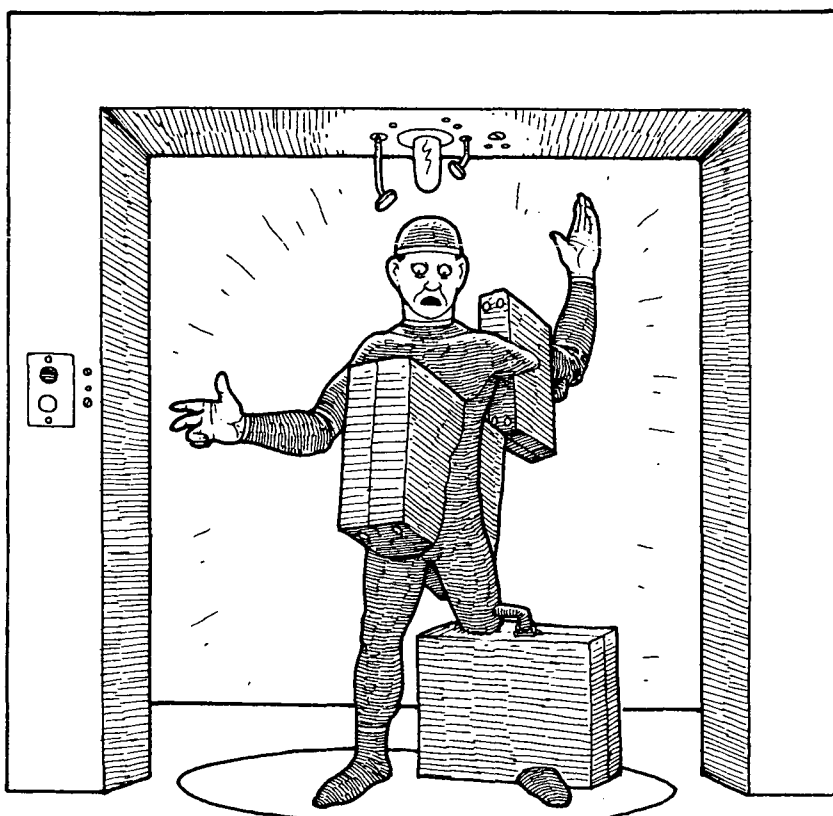

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